

GEORGE CRABBE: POET AND SOCIAL CRITIC

by

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CHAPTER 6

"UPON YOURSELVES DEPEND"

I

Had my intention in this study of Crabbe's social ideas been to examine each of Crabbe's major poems in chronological order then this chapter would be devoted to a discussion of Tales (1812). But a detailed analysis of the type given to "The Parish Register" and The Borough is impracticable in the case of Tales, which contains little of what is normally termed "social criticism." However as the first tale, "The Dumb Orators," indicates, such an analysis is by no means impossible; Crabbe opened the poem with a sketch of an encounter between a confirmed Tory, Justice Bolt, and a zealous Radical, Hammond. By beginning Tales with a political debate Crabbe invited his readers to see the actions of its various characters in a socio-political context. Several of the stories, such as "The Convert" (Tale XIX), are case studies of

individual attempts to come to terms with changing social values. For instance the character of John Dighton in "The Convert" was based on a reputable London bookseller, and presumably (although little is known of the original John Dighton) Crabbe's sketch represents a documented instance of the new relativist values destroying an older way of life.¹ But to do justice to the vastness of such themes and the complexity of Crabbe's psychological characterization, more space is required than is available at present.

No student of Crabbe, however, can possibly ignore the poem in which Crabbe reaches the zenith of his powers as a poet. A project which seems manageable is to discuss one of the tales from Tales in conjunction with several of the "new" poems recently published by Arthur Pollard from the MSS in the possession of the John Murray Publishing Company.² Moreover this plan has the advantage of introducing some of these "new" Crabbe poems about which critics and scholars have yet said little. Three poems lending themselves to such a study are "The Insanity of Ambitious Love," "The Patron" (Tale V), and "David Morris." In all three, one can see Crabbe wrestling with the theme of the individual in society.

The subject of the individual's relation to his society is of course to be found in the literature of any period, but it is no accident that many examples of the theme are to be found in Crabbe's poems. Writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were particularly concerned with the ways and means of

¹See The British Critic, XLI (1813), 383.

²New Poems by George Crabbe, ed. Arthur Pollard (Liverpool University Press, 1960).

keeping society stable while allowing the individual to pursue his ambitions. Even the novelist Frances Burney, usually thought of in connection with stories of young women entering society, treats the subject at length at the beginning of Cecilia. She has Mr. Monckton, who argues one side of the issue, warn Cecilia: "Experience shews that the opposition of an individual to a community is always dangerous."³ In a rather diluted form the subject is also to be found in the endless literary arguments over whether the individual should or should not conform to current tastes and fashions. Between the period of the French Revolution and the first Reform Bill, when a popular uprising was feared in England, the subject was treated with great seriousness; many men turned their pens to convincing the nation that ambition was the eighth deadly sin. For instance Edmund Burke commented that ambition was "one of the natural, inbred, incurable distempers of a powerful democracy."⁴

Assertions of the danger of ambition could have only limited appeal, however, when England's trade and industry were manifestly flourishing as a result of the efforts of ingenious industrialists such as Matthew Boulton, and agricultural reformers such as Robert Bakewell and Coke of Holkham. The value of ambition and individualism was given tangible proof daily, as the spinning and weaving industries were rebuilt around the inventions of such men

³Frances Burney, Cecilia, I, 22.

⁴Edmund Burke, An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs (1791), in The Works of Edmund Burke, Bohn's Library ed. (London, 1901-1906), III, 78.

as Arkwright, Cartwright and Crompton. The mistaken but widespread interpretation of Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations as a rule book to laissez-faire also offered strong support for the belief that the country benefited from allowing its citizens unbridled use of their capacities.

As a result of these conflicting opinions about ambition, many people were unclear whether it was or was not ultimately good. For instance it was apprehended that the ambitious labourer would be unlikely to go on the parish dole, and for this reason his ambition was to be encouraged. But this same labourer might also forget his "proper place," and challenge God's appointed order; consequently his ambition was to be treated with caution. This uncertainty led Robert Southey to condemn unreservedly the new spirit of individualism he detected in the lower and middle classes: "The prevailing opinions of this age go to the destruction of every thing which has hitherto been held sacred. They tend to arm the poor against the rich; the many against the few: worse than this, . . . for it will also be a war of hope and enterprize against timidity, of youth against age."⁵ Southey had been greatly troubled by the uprisings of 1816 and 1819, and it was his fear of a general collapse of English law which led him to inveigh so strongly against the "prevailing opinions." With the help of hindsight, we can see today that this fear amongst the upper classes of the ambitions of the workers resulted in part from the astonishing ignorance of lower class life. Southey feared

⁵Robert Southey, Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society, Colloquy II, I, 31.

the "mob" because he knew so little about the ordinary working people living around him.

Like many other people of his time Crabbe was uncertain whether or not to endorse the ambitions of the lower classes; he knew that if these people failed in their ambitions they faced poverty of the most terrible kind.⁶ His dilemma was all the more acute because he recognized that intelligence was not determined by station. As he remarked in the Preface to Tales of the Hall: "We ... must look on genius and talent as we are wont to do on time and chance, that happen indifferently to all mankind." But since he was primarily concerned with presenting individuals caught up in their ambitions, rather than caricatures to illustrate a certain point of view, his poems offer what was so sadly lacking at the time -- a sympathetic and knowledgeable view of the ambitious motives and goals of ordinary people.

The most interesting of the three poems under discussion (although the least successful) both for its vigorous writing and its subjects -- madness and factories -- is "The Insanity of Ambitious Love."⁷ Primarily a poet of the countryside, Crabbe generally dealt

⁶In Melincourt (1817), Peacock, in the story of Desmond, shows the terrible poverty which can result from an individual's refusal to abandon his ideals. But like most novelists of the time he concocts a happy ending by having Anthelia, the benevolent landlord, help Desmond and his family. Crabbe rarely permitted such happy endings.

⁷At the end of the MS Crabbe has written in cipher: "Lines 380, Finis. Nov. 28. 1816." Thus he must have been working on the poem at the same time as he was writing Tales of the Hall. As Arthur Pollard has noted, the internal evidence of the poem suggests Crabbe had originally intended the poem for inclusion in Tales of the Hall, possibly as one of Richard's tales. See New Poems by George Crabbe, pp. 2-3.

with rural problems, yet "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" portrays a man brought up to work in a factory. Crabbe was by no means unaware of the new urban and industrial areas of England as many critics from the time of Hazlitt have attempted to suggest.⁸ One of his friends was Dr. Edmund Cartwright, the inventor of the power loom. Crabbe's son gives an interesting account of a visit his parents made to Dr. Cartwright's factory: "In the summer of 1787, my father and mother paid Dr. Cartwright a visit at Doncaster; but when she entered the vast building, full of engines thundering with resistless power, yet under the apparent management of children, the sight of the little creatures condemned to such a mode of life in their days of natural innocence, quite overcame her feelings, and she burst into tears."⁹ As Pollard notes, this visit may well have been the inspiration for "The Insanity of Ambitious Love." Since these mills were notorious for the way in which workers were compelled to stand by their machines for long hours, with few holidays, it is all the more interesting that Crabbe should have chosen the theme of ambition for his one and only representation of factory conditions.

However any attempt at detailed analysis of "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" is fraught with difficulties, for Crabbe never published the poem himself. If it were evident that "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" was one of those poems which Crabbe left at his death to be collected by his son into a last volume then we might

⁸ See Hazlitt's essay "Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe," in The Spirit of the Age (1825).

⁹ Life, Ch. vi, p. 136.

safely conclude that Crabbe felt the poem to be in a finished state.¹ But all we know is that Crabbe's son did not publish it in

▲ Posthumous Tales. As a result, any conclusions about Crabbe's attitudes which are drawn from this poem must be treated cautiously. Why Crabbe rejected the poem is unknown. His reasons may have been artistic. More important, there is no way of telling whether the poem remained unpublished because Crabbe did not like the implied conclusions. Such an hypothesis may seem fanciful, for after all Crabbe did write the poem. But it is not so fanciful as one might think, when one recalls that Crabbe often wrote large sections of his poetry at a single sitting. His "dream poems" were written in this way,¹⁰ and since "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" has some of the marks of a dream poem, quite conceivably Crabbe felt the poem raised inopportune issues. Finally no sure proof exists that the poem is complete as it stands; certainly it does not succeed in resolving artistically its two opposing attitudes to ambition. From the textual changes, one can see that Crabbe was still at work emending the poem. However since the poem is in at least a second draft, it almost certainly incorporates the main issues Crabbe wished to raise. Thus even if we cannot draw any hard and fast conclusions about Crabbe's resolution of the problem of ambition, the poem can tell us a great deal about Crabbe's own difficulty in finding a satisfactory representation of the problems associated with ambition.

¹⁰For example, see the account of how "Sir Eustace Grey" was completed very quickly. Life, Ch. ix, p. 262.

When discussion of the poem is so difficult, one might well ask why the attempt should be made. The reason is not only that "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" deals in part with factory life, but that it contains one of the strongest indictments of the hard life of the labourer Crabbe ever made. In all of Crabbe's work nothing equals the central section of the madman's vision, with his description of the horrors of early nineteenth century working class life. Yet Crabbe's own position in the poem is by no means clear. Whereas the madman's vision at first appears credible, at the end of the poem Crabbe appears to side with Jacques in condemning the man's story. The poem is an excellent example of Crabbe's ambivalent rendering of social problems. Much of the ambiguity may result from the poem's remaining unfinished, but as has been seen already, a dual approach is characteristic of Crabbe's poetry. "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" thus offers an opportunity to watch Crabbe in the act of attempting to represent within a single poem two opposing beliefs -- that working class life is relentless toil, and that ambitious hopes lead to unwarranted discontent with the "useful Arts."

The poem has a curious form, being composed of three distinct parts: first, an introduction of forty-five lines, serving as a type of framework to contain the madman's story; second, the madman's story itself; and third, a quasi-conclusion. The first section, in which a general discussion of madness takes place, offers Crabbe a means of introducing and commenting on the madman. During this discussion, the rector Jacques mentions a madman he knows,

and a few days later suggests that he take the narrator (presumably Richard, although this is not certain, and indeed, of no great concern) to visit the madman. On their return, the Squire asks about the visit, and the narrator agrees to tell the madman's story. This short introduction is an obvious prelude to the tale itself. Although the narrator explains that he will retell the madman's story, it is actually told in the first person so that one forgets that the tale is being retold. The story of the madman takes up the rest of the poem, with sixty lines added at the end, when Jacques breaks in to try and convince the man of his madness. The forty-five line introduction is in Crabbe's usual heroic couplet; the madman's tale is in the form of eight line stanzas. At the end, Crabbe does not carry through his pretence of having a narrator tell the story at second hand; Jacques and his friend break into the madman's story themselves.

The madman's story is obviously the most important part of the poem. His narration commences when he welcomes the visitors to his home, which he believes to be a mansion decked with expensive purple velvet, Persian carpets and gold-inlaid decorations. He explains to his visitors that in his youth he lived in far different circumstances:

Where, think you, past my youthful Hours
 When Girls were first with Pleasure seen?
 Believe me, wasting noble Powers
 Within a Father's vast Machine,
 Where Springs & Spindles rattling rang,
 And whizzing Wheels, a noisy row,
 And loud the busy Damsels sang,
 While, roaring, rushed the Flood below
 (lines 70-77).

His stories of conquests among the factory girls reveal him to be rather proud, but Crabbe's charming description of love in the mill certainly inclines us favourably to the factory Romeo:

And oft by moonlight have we gone
Among the Wheels, then dumb & still,
And many a Star has, laughing, shone
On thefts committed in the Mill

(lines 82-85).

When the factory girls, in spite of their lack of sexual inhibitions, cannot satisfy his ambitions, he leaves to seek his fortune.

Significantly, he expresses the same sort of distaste for a life of labour as Crabbe had done when piling butter casks on the Slaughden quays: "But soon I fled the vulgar throng, / A low, mechanic, dirty Crew" (lines 86-87). As his motives for leaving are portrayed sympathetically, we have no reason to doubt that he genuinely was unable to find happiness in a life of physical labour:

Then I to higher Scenes withdrew.
Why weakly wait to meet Distress,
When Nature prompts us to persue
Our individual Happiness

(lines 90-93).

One is reminded that Crabbe did much the same thing when he threw up his job as an apothecary to seek his fortune as a man of letters in London.

The young man's determination to find a better life outside the factory is hardly surprising. This was the ambition of many apprentices and factory workers all through the nineteenth century. What is surprising is the manner in which he attempts to realize his ambitions. When a young girl tells him how the gypsies help people to fulfil their dreams, he decides to throw over his dull

factory job and go in search of them. Up to this point, nothing has suggested that the man's story is anything but a true account of his search for the good life. However when the man describes his visit to the gypsy cave, the poem moves into the realm of fable or allegory. On his way to the cave he passes by abbey walls, "where all confess the Fairies be" (line 107). Yet this element of the supernatural is introduced with considerable skill, for when the madman realizes that his story will be difficult for his visitors to believe, he ingenuously warns them to make an effort of faith. Since this warning serves for everyone listening to the story, including the reader, we prepare, in Coleridge's well worn phrase, for a "suspension of disbelief." The supernatural plays a necessary, and indeed, a credible role in the poem, since it accounts for the man's prophetic vision.

The man next explains how he found the gypsies in a mysterious cave, where he met the beautiful Gypsy Queen who prophesied his future. It is interesting to note the similarity between Crabbe's poem and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" of Keats (1819). Both poems illustrate the sad consequences of placing too much trust in the false promise of a life of love and beauty. Like Keats, Crabbe obviously felt the power of attraction in this promise of unending happiness; his picture of the world deprived of "La Belle Dame" is as forbidding and hopeless as Keats's "cold hillside." I do not wish to suggest, however, that Crabbe's Gypsy Queen is in any sense a true prophet; like the witches in Macbeth her job is to give incomplete prophecies and so lure men to madness. Yet like

that of the witches of Macbeth, her prophecy contains elements of truth. The first alternative she presents to the young man -- a Dantesque hell¹¹ of unrelenting toil and unhappiness -- agrees well with many social reformers' descriptions of the life of the labourer. Moreover, it will be recalled that in The Village Crabbe had described a similar hell for the "poor laborious natives of the place." (I. 42).

Although the Gypsy Queen's prophecy is fairly long, it should be quoted at length, since its descriptive power is of the utmost importance to the poem:

I look'd, and I beheld a Plain,
 Bare! trodden! worn on every Side,
 And there were Men, who wrought with Pain,
 And to the meaner Tasks applied.
 They comb'd, they wove, they span, they dyed,
 While pale Clerks, pensive at their Seats,
 Earn'd the poor Pittences & sigh'd.
 This, this, the pay that Labour meets!

There Labour brought the pond'rous Ore!
 There took from the eternal Heap,
 Now strove to melt the stubborn store,
 Now forc'd the fire its Rage to keep.
 Lo yonder Docks, cut wide & deep,
 Where toil'd the Slave! whom Death must free,
 Where half-starv'd Wives approach'd to weep
 For men compell'd to slave at Sea.

There were all sights of Care & Toil;
 The Smith his ponderous Hammer heav'd,
 The Labourer plow'd the thankless Soil,
 Porters their heavy Loads receiv'd,
 Pale Weavers sat, of Air bereav'd,
 And sang the melancholy song,
 And Watchmen, for a while reliev'd,
 Walk'd dolefully their Wards along.

¹¹At this time many English poets, including Byron, Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth, were influenced by Dante through the translation of Henry Cary. See Ian Jack, English Literature 1815-1832 (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1963), pp. 378-382. In Nightmare Abbey (Ch. vi), Peacock also comments on the new interest in Dante.

I saw the Ships, & from the deck
 Men dropt into the rav'nous tide,
 I saw the Ship itself a Wreck,
 And many struggling Wretches died;
 I saw the Fishers, how they plied
 Their cold laborious Arts for bread,
 They tried & fail'd, & still they tried,
 By Misery cloath'd, by Meanness fed.

Men lame & blind were begging here,
 Where by them mov'd the heedless Throng,
 Where dead Men's Bodies on the Bier
 By Men half dead were borne along.
 Bad Women sang the mocking Song
 Of Love & Pleasure, when the face
 Bore every Mark of Secret wrong
 And every Stain of foul Disgrace.

Poor jaundic'd Men at sick'ning Trades,
 I saw, in Palsies, half Alive,
 Soon to depart, & now but Shades,
 And those yet fated to survive,
 Intent with idle Hopes to thrive,
 All servile in their Thrift, & mean
 (lines 224-269).

The crucial problem at this point is how the reader receives this "vision." I would submit that the hell described contains little if anything to warn the reader that it is not a representation of early nineteenth century England. If this is the case, then it is only to be expected that the reader should sympathize with the man for following "the Dictates of the Heart" in choosing his imaginary heaven. This phrase "the Dictates of the Heart" (line 351) is one which could have two meanings at this period. In a novel such as Bage's Hermsprong or Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho, it is used with approbation, but in novels such as Maria Edgeworth's Helen or Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility, it is used with violent disapproval. It is one of those key phrases which, by its usage, shows whether a writer had imbibed the

teachings of Rousseau or followed the older eighteenth century tradition in the belief that the heart must be controlled by the head. Usually Crabbe disliked any Rousseauistic notions that man should follow the inclinations of his heart, but in this case, significantly enough, the reader is given little warning of the man's mistake in allowing his heart to rule his head.

The effect of the Gypsy's prophecy on the young man, however, is abundantly clear; when he can bear the sight no longer, he cries out: "Enough! dear Guide, . . . contrive / To shift this Soul-appalling Scene" (lines 270-271). The Gypsy Queen complies, changing the vision to one of luxurious Eastern splendour where work is unnecessary and pleasure is the norm. When she asks him to choose which of the two alternatives he prefers, he of course embraces the life of happiness. One should recall that the reader knows the man is mad, and therefore never doubts that the heavenly world of his vision is imaginary. The question is whether we condemn him for choosing an imaginary world of heavenly bliss rather than a real world of unrelenting toil.

Up to this point in the poem, Crabbe's sympathies have seemed to be more or less with the madman. But when the madman finishes his story his guests (Jacques and his friend) suddenly rise up in anger. Jacques angrily tells the man that he is deceiving himself, that his entire story has been a lie. He reveals, moreover, that the madman is not the son of a mill owner, but the son of a parish clerk. The man never worked in a factory at all, but was the servant of a rich lady whom he apparently tried

to seduce. Out of pity this lady now looks after him. The ending comes as a great surprise. Although Crabbe has prepared us to accept that the madman has deluded himself about his present state of luxury, no intimation has been given that his entire story was false. The man's early life in the mill and his vision of the ignobility of most labouring jobs carries conviction.

What seems to have happened here is that Crabbe has had difficulty in attempting to work two themes into the same poem. The man who goes mad ambitiously over-reaching his abilities or his means is a recurring subject in Crabbe's poetry, but in "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" Crabbe has also attempted to portray the world of dreams a man creates when unable to face the ordinary difficulties of everyday life. In the first theme madness is treated simply as the nemesis of folly; in the second, Crabbe treats madness as a state of being worthy in its own right of poetic description. In this poem the two themes have failed to mesh, the principal reason being that the madman's "false" story overshadows the account given by Jacques of how the man "dar'd to gaze with sinful View" on the lady he served.

Presumably Crabbe wished Jacques to represent his own opinion, yet the ending, as it stands, makes Jacques appear unsympathetic. If the man is harmlessly mad, Jacques has no reason to treat him insensitively. The madman's tale so incenses Jacques that he destroys the little bits of string and straw which the man had tied together into what he believed to be flowers. Furthermore Jacques is certain that the man's vision indicates that he is

evil as well as mad:

Thy Choice to quit th' useful Arts
 And that luxurious State to share
 Was surely thy corrupted Heart's,
 No Sybil thought thee worth her Care!
 No Gipsy -- but the vicious dare
 On such infernal Views to dwell;
 For Madness these the Soul prepare,
 Souls ripe & ready to rebell
 (lines 400-407).

That the man attempted to leave a life of servitude for one of ease and luxury is understandable, and while one might not wish to condone his methods, one sympathizes with the feelings which prompted the actions. It will be recalled that in "The Parish Register" Crabbe had recounted, not unsympathetically, how Donald artfully wound his way into the service of Mistress Dobson until he saw her "mistress -- friend -- protectress -- spouse" (II. 102).¹² For Jacques to condemn the madman as vicious because he had hoped to improve his life and station smacks of all the Christian fanaticism of people like Wilberforce who inveighed against the "selfishness" of those who wanted a better life for themselves: "In the lower orders, when not motionless under the weight of a superincumbent despotism, it [selfishness] manifests itself in pride, and its natural offspring, insubordination in all its modes."¹³ Like Wilberforce, Jacques is clearly dismayed and frightened by the possible results of pride and selfishness in the lower orders.

¹² In The Borough Crabbe noted: "Happy the lovers class'd alike in life, / Or happier yet the rich endowing wife" (XX. 161-162). Clearly he accepted that a woman's money could be a great help to a young man beginning his career.

¹³ William Wilberforce, A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, p. 400.

One of the points that gains the madman sympathy is that the reader never sees him doing anything evil. Jacques chooses the vaguest of terms to hint at the crime, a presentation which is hardly persuasive. Crabbe himself seems to have hesitated over the degree of sympathy he wished the reader to have for the madman. In an earlier version he had thought of the madman as a person of some station:

For the Wretch came not of prosaic Race
His Air was manly¹⁴

But Crabbe deleted these lines, leaving out all mention of the man's station, until at the end of the poem, Jacques reveals that the madman does come from a prosaic race -- he is the son of a parish clerk. Crabbe also changed his mind about the effect he wished the man's madness to have on the reader. In the first draft he had said that the madman's lofty spirit had impressed the visitors to believe:

That Madness lightens or Supports Distress.¹⁵

Later Crabbe changed this line to read:

That Madness lightens or conceals distress

thus making madness less an alternative way of opting out of miserable conditions. If madness "supports" distress, then such distress is not a punishment, but if madness only "conceals" distress, then madness is a punishment. In emending this line Crabbe appears to have wished to make the madman's miserable existence in his hovel even less appealing.

¹⁴New Poems by George Crabbe, p. 148.

¹⁵New Poems by George Crabbe, p. 148.

When Jacques intervenes, demanding that the madman be forced to realize his miserable condition, he does so in part because he cannot bear to see the man rewarded for his sins. While Jacques' concern for the man's immortal soul is commendable, his attempt to bring the man to a proper state of sin and fear of God seems perverse in this context. If the madman is happy, then it seems strange to make him sane in order to have him unhappy. Jacques' threat to bind the man in a "strait Garment" in "Darkness," and to consign him "to silence! impotent & blind!" (lines 418-420) seems altogether out of proportion to his crime. The madman's act of rebellion leads Jacques to threaten repressive measures as violent and blameworthy as anything the madman has done.¹⁶

If Crabbe had wanted to show only the delusions of madness he could have done so in a few lines. But as in "Sir Eustace Grey," he is genuinely concerned to present the madman's state of mind, to develop the idea that madness is a psychological release from unbearable social or personal problems. In presenting the story which the madman has conjured up to hide his real failings, Crabbe manages to give a credible account of the horror and ugliness associated with many labouring jobs. As a result, Jacques' explanation of the reasons for the man's madness appears far too simple-minded. Jacques says that the story of the Gypsy Queen is false, that the man was a servant who attempted to make love to his "Lady

¹⁶ The same type of unsuccessful ending occurs in Tale XXI of Tales where the father of the "learned boy" refutes his son's new principles of free-thought by burning his books and beating him into submission.

pious." Imagistically, however, the madman's version succeeds where that of Jacques fails. The story the madman gives is not just his own life history, but a construct of the difficulties actually faced by many working people at this time, people forced to work long hours for little pay. What the madman has done is to imagine himself as the victim of the great factory system which made slaves of the labourers.

In this version of the labourers who "wrought with Pain" the madman lists the people in the cotton and woollen trades -- "They comb'd, they wove, they span, they dyed" -- the pun in this line underlining how the jobs by which they live are also those by which they die. He mentions the men in the iron and steel industries, along with the clerks, "pensive at their Seats" earning "Pittences." He tells of the dockers, the sailors, the fishermen; he concludes that all of them have a hard and miserable lot, and that many die from sickness and poverty. Those unfortunate enough to survive cannot afford to live as human beings, but have to live a miserly existence -- "All servile in their Thrift, & mean." The descriptions are so intense, and so close to what is known to be the actual conditions of some working men, that the reader takes them seriously as committed social criticism.

The madman's description of his choice between two lives, one of opulence, the other, poverty, is by no means illusory. Even if his story of how he worked in a factory as a young boy is discounted, and Jacques' story of his being a servant in a wealthy household is accepted, one cannot deny that the boy must have had

some premonition that his choice was narrow. As a labourer or a servant with no capital, no influence and no representation of any kind, the man was a victim of what Carlyle called the cash nexus. Even if he were not actually born into a vast spinning mill, in one sense he was the victim of the great machine of industry. No one can blame him for believing that his future lay in marrying money. Certainly that is the way a great many of the middle class and aristocracy saw their own future at this period.

In "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" Crabbe has presented two different views of ambition. In the first, the man is portrayed as a slave to the wheel of labour. When he describes his attempts to rise above this type of life, one feels that he has every right to do so, since the life of the ordinary labourer was difficult. The second view however -- that presented by Jacques -- is that the man goes mad because he is incapable of adapting to the ordinary difficulties and hardships which are to be found amongst all classes of men. For Jacques, the man fails because he has a romantic dream of perfection which bears no similarity to the real world, a dream which spoils him for the type of life demanded by the complexities of day-to-day existence. The difference between these two attitudes is not merely one of emphasis; rather it is representative of two major ideologies of the time. In the man's dream of a future world of bliss one can see the same sort of aspiration "after excellence" and "impatience at all the oppressions which are done under the sun" that Shelley described in the Preface to The Revolt of Islam (1818).¹⁷

¹⁷ The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, p. 32.

Jacques' view is closer to that of Southey when he has Sir Thomas More say in the Colloquies: "We have both speculated in the joy and freedom of our youth upon the possible improvement of society; and both in like manner have lived to dread with reason the effects of that restless spirit, which . . . insults Heaven and disturbs the earth."¹⁸ Shelley believed in the possible improvement of both man and society; Southey felt that the one would lead to personal unhappiness and the other to anarchy. This dichotomy, which runs through all the writing of the period, both political and literary, is indicative of a major split in western sensibility.

In "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" Crabbe appears to vacillate between showing ambition as a force for good or for evil. Interestingly enough, much the same thing happens in Thomson's poem "The Castle of Indolence." In the first canto Thomson begins by describing the enchanted ground of the wizard Idleness. But like Crabbe, for a time he seems overcome by his own descriptions of "this Ant-Hill Earth" where men spend their lives in laborious tasks, searching for pleasures they "dare not taste" (I, xlix). As a result, his presentation of the land where "Freedom reign'd" and everyone could "eat, drink, study, sleep, as it may fall" (I, xxxv) seems designed to recommend that man should eschew self-control and allow himself to be governed by his unbridled passion. One can see that both Crabbe and Thomson, when they looked around them at the

¹⁸Robert Southey, Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society, Colloquy I, I, 19.

lives of the labouring people, were overwhelmed by the feeling that man had lost his sense of proportion in the vast changes sweeping over England.¹⁹ Thomson uses the image of an ant-hill; Crabbe speaks of a "vast Machine." This total sense of disorientation which seemed to threaten the age-old values caused both Thomson and Crabbe to doubt for a time the efficacy of reasoned self-control. Both were led to construct imaginatively an alternative world in which the individual allows himself to be ruled by his passions in the hope that they will put him in touch with another set of values. But in both poets the feeling is only momentary; they end by reaffirming the value of reason, self-control and obedience to moral and social laws.

Clearly in Crabbe's case, however, his affirmation of Jacques' values does not generate nearly as much conviction and energy as does the madman's vision of a world out of control. Probably one of the reasons for Crabbe's failure to achieve an artistic reconciliation of the opposing views of Jacques and the madman (apart from the possibility that Crabbe had not finished his revisions) is that the young man is described as a victim of urban rather than rural problems. We know that Crabbe felt the problems caused by the factories and crowded urban centres were far greater than those of the country, where to some extent the paternal influence of the landlord remained. Consequently he felt less assured about the amelioration of urban abuses than he did about

¹⁹In Burke's writings (especially Letters on a Regicidal Peace), one can see much the same feeling of helplessness before the vast social and political changes encompassed in the French Revolution.

those in the country.²⁰ When Crabbe came to describe the madman as the victim of a depersonalized machine, it is possible that the picture he conjured up was so horrific that solutions were not at once apparent. This feeling of near-helplessness in the face of urban problems is expressed in a letter he wrote to Mary Leadbeater in 1817. Requesting a description of her secluded Quaker community, he said:

I have observed an extraordinary difference in village manners in England, especially between those places otherwise nearly alike, when there was and when there was not a leading man, or a squire's family, or a manufactory near, or a populous, vitiated town, etc. All these, and many other circumstances, have great influence. Your quiet village, with such influencing minds, I am disposed to think highly of. No one, perhaps, very rich -- none miserably poor. No girls, from six years to sixteen, sent to a factory, where men, women, and children of all ages are continually with them breathing contagion. Not all, however: we are not so evil -- there is a resisting power, and it is strong; but the thing itself, the congregation of so many minds, and the intercourse it occasions, will have its powerful and visible effect.²¹

Again in 1826, Crabbe wrote, "I hope in your place of quiet, you and your neighbours ... are freed from the gloom and distress that hang over places of trade and manufacturing like this."²² Like Robert Owen,²³ Crabbe realized that the new manufacturing system was

²⁰ Later social novelists, such as Disraeli and Mrs. Gaskell, would have solved urban problems by encouraging the barons of industry to assume the patronage hitherto undertaken by the landed gentry.

²¹ Quoted from Life, Ch. ix, pp. 255-256.

²² Letter to Mary Leadbeater, February 3, 1826, in The Leadbeater Papers (London, 1862), II, 400. Crabbe often remarks that Trowbridge, his last parish, was a busy manufacturing centre.

²³ See Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System (1815).

creating not only new products, but a new type of person as well. Notably enough, at the end of "The Insanity of Ambitious Love," Crabbe has Jacques claim that the madman is actually a son of the land, which might suggest an attempt on Crabbe's part to repudiate the original picture of the man born into a "vast Machine." But a mere statement of this kind cannot destroy the central section of the poem with its picture of the labourer as grist for an indifferent mill.

As it stands, the ending fails to fit the context of the poem. From the internal evidence, one is tempted to say that the madman's vision forms a unity by itself, and that originally Crabbe had meant it to stand alone. If this is the case, then Crabbe had second thoughts about advocating personal ambition as a wholly praiseworthy and universal response to the problems and difficulties inherent in the nature of man. As will be seen in the discussions of the next two poems, Crabbe's objective was to present the madman's ambition as one of many components in a sane and whole view of man's role in society. Unlike Keats, who was interested in portraying only the sense of grief at the loss of perfection, Crabbe wished also to present the reasons for the loss, and thus to suggest the type of social compromise necessary for life to continue.

II

That "The Patron" (Tale V, Tales) is an attempt to represent some of the problems confronting the individual who endeavours to rise above his class, all of Crabbe's critics have agreed. Yet no general consensus of opinion has been reached about what the poem tells us of Crabbe's own opinions. Huchon, for instance, has commented that Crabbe wished to show:

Pride is a failing to which we are all liable. Its final overthrow can be compassed only if our reason, after rejecting all external assistance and claiming to be sole arbiter of conduct, issues vanquished from the struggle with the passions. Enlightened by our defeat, we shall recognise the frailty of our nature and no longer decline, in critical circumstances, the aid of religion.²⁴

Apparently Huchon sees the tale primarily in terms of a lesson on humility. Robert Chamberlain, on the other hand, takes a completely different view when he claims that, although "the young literary hopeful deserves punishment for foolish behaviour, the severe punishment he receives -- insanity and an early death -- ill fits the crime." Chamberlain, who admits to disliking "The Patron," concludes: "We sense in the poem an unjustified anger towards the somewhat inconsiderate but far from criminal noble patron."²⁵ Both these readings, it seems to me, fail to do justice to the poem. Nowhere in the poem does Crabbe suggest that the young poet "deserves punishment," nor does he show "unjustified anger" towards the patron. That the poem praises humility, as Huchon states, is

²⁴Huchon, p. 332.

²⁵Robert L. Chamberlain, George Crabbe, p. 125.

certainly true, but the poem also suggests that the individual should trust himself and rely on his own strength of will, which is a totally different proposition. I do not wish to argue that "The Patron" is the most exciting poem in Tales, but Crabbe's rendering of the relation between patron and dependent is far more subtle, and the social commentary more profound, than most critics have perceived. Whereas Crabbe failed in "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" to reconcile the opposing attitudes to ambition, in "The Patron" he succeeds in fashioning a framework which permits him to introduce and juxtapose them in a creative tension.

The outline of "The Patron" is fairly straightforward. The poem tells the story of an ambitious young man, John, a borough-bailiff's son who has great hopes of becoming a poet. At election year John aids Lord Frederick Damer in his election by writing squibs on his opponent. Lord Frederick decides to reward John, and invites him to stay for some time at his family's country house. While there John is praised, pampered and spoiled. Overcome by the quality of life of the rich and the attentions Emma bestows on him, young John begins to look forward to a reward enabling him to live in such surroundings. With his ambitions well cultivated, he soon finds his father's house with its air of thrift, its cheap wine and "boil'd and roast," distasteful. But when the test comes, and John looks to Lord Frederick to place him in the church, the Lord backs down. The remainder of the poem deals with John's gradual decline into madness resulting from the frustrations of ambition. Whereas "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" had dealt mostly

with the state of madness and its delusions, the emphasis in "The Patron" is on the causes of the growth of madness. In both cases the theme is similar -- the inability of an individual to adjust to a humble existence when his expectations of a better life have been aroused.

The first thing to note is that the outline of the story, by itself, does not give any hint of Crabbe's intentions. Crabbe might easily have used the details of the story either as a means to berate the aristocracy for failing to help the lower classes or as a means of showing the lower classes the dangers of attempting to rise above one's station. Thus the reader's response to the story depends largely on the hints Crabbe drops of his own attitude to John's ambition.

At the beginning of the poem Crabbe takes care to point out that John is from the respectable lower class of professional people; his father is a borough-bailiff earning enough to keep his family in "decent state." John's father has placed all his other sons in "busy states" where they are able to thrive, thus establishing Crabbe's presupposition that people in John's position, given a certain amount of prudence, can live a happy and prosperous life. John is by no means faced with the prospect of becoming a labourer or a menial servant. If he wishes, his father will set him up in business as he has done for John's brothers. For John, however, such a life is not sufficient; he has ambitions to be a poet. John "felt not a love for money-making arts" (line 10). Crabbe gives the reader ample warning that he believes John's pursuit

of the poetic muse to be a highly speculative and uncertain venture. The description of John's impractical attitude to life carries obvious ironic overtones:

Yet in his walks, his closet, and his bed,
All frugal cares and prudent counsels fled;
And bounteous Fancy for his glowing mind
Wrought various scenes, and all of glorious kind;
Slaves of the ring and lamp! what need of you,
When Fancy's self such magic deeds can do?
(lines 77-82)

The implicit irony in this passage is achieved through over-statement. For anyone to believe that he can achieve all he desires by the imagination is a gross exaggeration. Crabbe underlines this point by imputing to John the belief that his imagination is more powerful even than the magic of Aladdin's world of rings and lamps. In addition Crabbe is also parodying eighteenth century over-statements about the primacy of the imagination.²⁶

From the outset of "The Patron," a sense of foreboding overshadows John's dreams of achieving poetic success. When John writes his election squibs, Lord Frederick praises him as "the Burns of English race, the happier Chatterton," the implication being that he is yet another great peasant poet about to rise from the people. However Burns died poor and Chatterton committed suicide. Yet Lord Frederick predicts that John's genius will enable him to overstep the barriers of rank to take his place among the great men of society. In this expansive mood, he invites young John to visit the Hall. As a result John feels that the prophecy

²⁶For instance, Robert Lloyd, in his poem "Shakespeare: An Epistle to Mr. Garrick" (1760), makes a number of extravagant claims for the power of the imagination.

is already beginning to come true.

Early in the poem Crabbe establishes that John typifies the foolish young man likely to be hurt by his own lack of prudence. While admitting that Crabbe purposely shows John to be lacking in prudence, I do not see how this supplies any evidence for Chamberlain's assertion that John "deserves punishment." On the contrary, the tone of presentation suggests that Crabbe sympathized with John. In some ways the sketch of John proves to be a portrait of Crabbe's own youth. John is more interested in poetry of the imagination than the mundane day-to-day affairs of his father's business. In his autobiographical sketch, Crabbe described his own youth in almost exactly the same terms:

What that other impediment to his succeeding in his intended profession was, may be readily conjectured from the bias and inclination of his mind, which at a very early period wandered into the fairy land of imagination, and rendered him unfit for a contention with the difficulties of life and the habits of severe application²⁷

In addition, Crabbe describes himself as having as little liking for the job of surgeon as he had shown John to have for business: "He probably did not find in himself that perseverance and fortitude which his situation required; nor can we suppose that the influence of the prevailing inclination [poetry] was long dormant in him."²⁸ Far from condemning John, or showing that his hopes to be a poet are the result of pride, Crabbe sympathized with John's plight,

²⁷"Biographical Account of the Rev. George Crabbe, L.L.B.," in The New Monthly Magazine, IV (1815), 512. The article was published anonymously, Crabbe giving the account of his life in the third person.

²⁸The New Monthly Magazine, IV (1815), 512.

for he had based it on the experiences of his own youth.

Up to this point then, the poem seems to be suggesting that ambitious young men are likely to be disappointed if they allow their dreams to outrun their prudence. Yet Crabbe deliberately undercuts this theme when he introduces an outside cause to give some basis for John's belief that he will succeed in establishing himself amongst the privileged. Without thinking of the consequences, Lord Frederick and his family go out of their way to praise John in order to make him feel one of them. The Lord's sister, Emma, even begins a flirtation. One should recall at this point that the madman in "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" went mad and was confined because he loved the lady whom he served. Crabbe is not explicit about the crime the madman committed, or tried to commit; Jacques only obliquely says that he gazed "with sinful View." In "The Patron" Crabbe has supplied a valid reason for John's love of Emma, for she begins the flirtation. John is probably too "poetic" to be tempted to anything sinful, but if the situation had been a little different, Emma might well have found herself encouraging a "sinful View." Crabbe makes abundantly clear that Emma has prompted John's love, and has raised him (at least in his own eyes) to her stature. Crabbe believes John to be in danger of losing his sanity because John's type of over-confidence will betray him in a society where the foolishness and selfishness of the Lord Fredericks and Lady Emmas lead him to believe that the class structure is less rigid than it is. Crabbe implies that in a society which was less imperfect, John's ambition would be welcomed.

His years as Chaplain to the Duke of Rutland at Belvoir Castle had taught Crabbe that to succeed by patronage great care was required not to offend by word or act. In the Polonius-like letter of John's father, Crabbe explains the delicate balancing act required of John. Surprisingly enough, this letter occupies a large proportion of the poem (one hundred and ninety lines out of a total of seven hundred and twenty-seven). In some revealing lines, John's father gives the warning not to react enthusiastically to anything which is normally the pursuit of the nobility. He takes for his example the ladies' singing. While enthusiastic acclaims of praise about the young ladies' voices are expected from a nobleman, such a response would be out of place in a person of John's dependent position:

When ladies sing, or in thy presence play,
Do not, dear John, in rapture melt away;
'Tis not thy part, there will be list'ners round,
To cry "divine!" and dote upon the sound;
Remember too, that though the poor have ears,
They take not in the music of the spheres;
They must not feel the warble and the thrill,
Or be dissolved in ecstasy at will;
Beside, 'tis freedom in a youth like thee
To drop his awe, and deal in ecstasy!
(lines 341-350)

Clearly Crabbe does not believe that people like John are unable to appreciate music. Even John's father does not believe this. The wording is subtle. He does not say that the poor cannot feel the "warble and the thrill," but that they must not. The implication is that, if a dependent values the lord's opinion, then he should not appear greatly affected by the music, for this would compromise his dependent position.

Crabbe obviously agreed with much of this advice to young John, and the emphasis upon retaining one's self-respect and integrity is soundly based. For instance, John's father asks: "John, thou'rt a genius; thou hast some pretence, / I think, to wit, but hast thou sterling sense" (lines 221-222)? This same sentiment is repeated in a letter Crabbe wrote to Sir Walter Scott. Discussing his own sons, Crabbe said: "I fully agree with you respecting the necessity of a profession for a youth of moderate fortune. Woe to the lad of genius without it!"²⁹ Yet Crabbe by no means allows John's father to become his overt mouthpiece. John's father is a businessman, and he treats John's visit to the Hall in business terms; he believes that John will profit if he manages to treat his patron with the correct mixture of deference and respect. The irony of the letter is that in attempting to advise John about every possible event that may arise, John's father neglects to mention the very situation which brings about John's downfall. While John's father worries that his son may bring home a baggage of a serving maid, John dreams of meetings with the Lady Emma. The advice, like that of Polonius, while good in so far as it goes, proves useless to John because it assumes him to be other than he is.

Although Crabbe appreciates the irony of John's position, he never allows his readers to become unsympathetic towards John. For instance at the time of John's disillusionment, when Lord Frederick and his family move to the city without inviting him to

²⁹Letter to Sir Walter Scott, 1812. Quoted from Life, Ch. viii, p. 207.

accompany them, Crabbe takes care to note that Lord Frederick gives John an assurance that he will act as his patron. The Lord is specific about this promise, (although vague about its contents), so that John has good reason for his expectations. But the promise is given because Lord Frederick feels himself embarrassed and compromised, not because he wants to help John:

Then came the noble friend -- "And will my lord
Vouchsafe no comfort? drop no soothing word?
Yes, he must speak:" he speaks, "My good young friend,
You know my views; upon my care depend;
My hearty thanks to your good father pay,
And be a student. -- Harry, drive away."
(lines 458-463).

Even John sees that he is being dropped, but he has based his hopes on Lord Frederick for so long that he dare not admit this fact to himself. After making John wait for several months, and treating him with officious reserve, Lord Frederick announces that a place in the church is out of the question. He sends John instead to a position in "busier scenes." His promise turns out to be worth little more than what John's father could have done.

Lord Frederick's letter is important, since it underlines how few were the options open to John. To elevate John to a position in society above that of the labourers, artisans and tradespeople would have been a simple but decisive move: Lord Frederick could have found John a place in the church; bought him a commission in the army; or sent him to one of the Inns of Court to train as a lawyer. But good church places were taken by younger sons; commissions in the army were expensive; and lawyers needed influence to gain society clients. Thirty years later, Disraeli,

in his novel Sybil (1845), gave a description of a young man attempting to find a place for himself in society: "I was obliged to work; I had no head I believe for the law; the church was not exactly in my way; and as for the army, how was I to advance without money or connexions!"³⁰ As Disraeli's comment indicates, England changed little in its social rigidity throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century. Because of the cost and scarcity of positions one might conclude that Lord Frederick was not unwarranted in his decision to send John into business. But such a view ignores an important point. When John's father sent his son to college, he did so with the idea of educating him for the church:

John kept his terms at college unreprieved,
Took his degree, and left the life he loved;
Not yet ordain'd, his leisure he employ'd
In the light labours he so much enjoy'd
(lines 57-60).

Lord Frederick knew John's position at the time he promised to help him; his letter to John shows clearly that he realized John had expected his help in gaining a promotion in the church. Without the help of a patron, John would have had to content himself with the position of curate. As Crabbe pointed out in Letter III of The Borough, curates, who were generally miserably paid, enjoyed none of the status for which their education qualified them.³¹ John's father could give him the education but could not find him the

³⁰ Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil; Or, the Two Nations (London, 1845), I, 311 (Bk. II, Ch. xvi).

³¹ In 1810 the Earl of Harrowby pointed out that many non-resident incumbents "of livings of £50. £60. or 70£. a year, put into their own pockets a portion of this wretched pittance, and left much less than the wages of a day-labourer for the subsistence of their curates." William Cobbett, Parliamentary Debates, XVII, 765.

parish. In refusing to help John into the position for which he was trained, Lord Frederick consigns John's education to the flames, and bids him start afresh. When seen in this light, Lord Frederick's decision to send John into business appears culpable.

At this point it is again worth noting how closely John's decision to find a patron corresponds to Crabbe's own decisions in his youth. In his autobiographical sketch Crabbe mentions that after a short time in London, he realized "that instead of being made known by his works, he must be first known to have them introduced."³² Both Crabbe and John placed all their hopes on patronage. Such hopes may have been unfounded (certainly Crabbe had even less reason to expect help from Burke than had John from Lord Frederick), yet Crabbe realized that for many people a patron's help was the only way to gain a respectable position. As Crabbe commented in his autobiographical sketch, one of the most remarkable features of his life was the number of people who helped him when he had no reason to expect such assistance:

If there be any thing in the life of Mr. Crabbe which calls for particular attention from a general and indifferent reader, it must be, as he has himself frequently remarked, that ready kindness, the continued benevolence and liberality of those friends, upon whom he had no other claim than that with which his need of their favours supplied him.³³

Chamberlain was quite mistaken in his belief that Crabbe felt such reliance on a patron was foolishness worthy of punishment.

³²The New Monthly Review, IV (1815), 513.

³³The New Monthly Review, IV (1815), 517.

Naturally enough, after having his hopes raised so high, John finds it impossible to adapt to the life of business. Office work he finds dull and uninteresting. Again, Crabbe does not show John as a proud rebel, but agrees with him that office work is boring:

Thanks to the patron, but of coldest kind,
Express'd the sadness of the poet's mind;
Whose heavy hours were pass'd with busy men,
In the dull practice of th' official pen
(lines 581-584).

Although John attempts to cope with his work on the London quays, finally he can bear the misery no longer and leaves. His reason for so doing is identical to that the madman gives in "The Insanity of Ambitious Love." Like the madman, John had:

A soul averse from scenes and works so new;
Fear, ever shrinking from the vulgar crew;
Distaste for each mechanic law and rule
(lines 595-597).

John's father, who at first sees no reason why his son should not succeed in business, believes "the boy would learn to scramble and to climb." But John does not learn to "scramble"; instead his mind cracks. A friend finds John alone in a bare room and takes him to his father's house where he receives the rest and care which cures him of his madness. Although restored to sanity, John is a broken man and dies, resigned to leave a world which holds for him no hope.

As has been noticed, Crabbe is in complete control of the subject matter. Through the evenness of tone and the many forebodings of the disaster which is to result from John's over-reliance

on his own genius, the reader is prepared to see John's ambition create hopes which can never be fulfilled. Therefore his madness is not unexpected. At the end of the poem John's father accepts the inevitability of his son's death:

The father grieved -- but, as the poet's heart
Was all unfitted for his earthly part;
As, he conceived, some other haughty fair
Would, had he lived, have led him to despair

. . .

Soothed by these thoughts, he felt a mournful joy
For his aspiring and devoted boy
(lines 678-687).

Realizing that his son was not made for this world, John's father takes a "mournful joy" in his death.

Huchon was of course correct in pointing out that John achieves happiness only when he conquers his pride and learns humility. Nor do I wish to disagree with his belief that Crabbe wished to show how necessary religion is to man. The point is that the poem implies more than these simple statements, and thus modifies the triteness of "men must be humble." For instance in his summing up Crabbe comments caustically on Lord Frederick and his sister Emma; he shows them both to be essentially unsympathetic, with little or no sense of responsibility for what has happened to John. Emma is rather pleased to find her beauty sufficient to drive a man to madness. And "my lord, to whom the poet's fate was told, / Was much affected, for a man so cold" (lines 704-705). To some degree the poem implies that people such as John must learn humility because those in control of power are indifferent to the

needs of the people they control and represent. It should not be forgotten that Lord Frederick is a member of parliament, and that Crabbe has taken pains to point out the part that John and his father played in gaining his election victory. John learns at least two meanings of the word "humble" -- one psychological and the other social. He must learn humility because excessive pride is a failing, but he must also learn to be humble because the great of the land decree that he remain amongst "the humble." It is no coincidence that the lower classes are often called "humble people" -- social rigidity ensures that they live in humility.

While criticizing Emma and her brother for encouraging John's hopes, Crabbe by no means holds them solely responsible for John's death. He does not see the struggle as an overt conflict between the classes. Rather Lord Frederick is characterized as a neutral or indifferent person, who does not wish either harm or good to John, and who brings about John's disaster, not because of malevolence, but because he does not care enough to become involved. Crabbe criticizes Lord Frederick for the same reasons that he criticized the vicar in "The Parish Register": not for his malice, but for his apathy. In effect, Crabbe's muted criticism of the aristocracy follows the advice John's father had given to John:

Be not a Quixote, ever up in arms
To give the guilty and the great alarms:
If never heeded, thy attack is vain;
And if they heed thee, they'll attack again
(lines 249-252).

Crabbe's dislike of Lord Frederick and Emma is clear, but he never censures them outright. The criticism is implicit however, and

would rankle all the more, since the way it is offered does not allow the aristocracy an excuse to retaliate.

Crabbe's use of the religious ending plays an important part in effecting a satisfactory conclusion. After being restored to sanity, John finds happiness in the consolation of religion; he becomes resigned to his fate, and accepts that he was not made for this world. John's separation from his patron, who should embody hope and charity, but who is frail, is analogous because of the religious context, to the sinner's separation from God. As he had done in "The Hall of Justice" Crabbe shifts the theme from an earthly to a spiritual level of interpretation. John's pride is then seen to be a spiritual sin as well as a worldly blunder.

Does the reader conclude that Crabbe wishes to imply that, in a world where the lower classes have little chance of rising above their station, the best thing for them is to learn resignation? Certainly this praise of resignation rather than ambition appears to place Crabbe amongst those who saw ambition as dangerous to society. When one considers Crabbe's position as a spokesman for the Church of England, an institution committed to teaching humility, such a depreciation of ambition is not unexpected. Especially in the difficult years at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Christian apologists constantly emphasized the need for man to restrain his selfish will and to learn humility. Wilberforce, Hannah More, William Lisle Bowles and many lesser known people such as Richard Yates all preached that the upper classes must support Christianity because it was the only social force capable of

resisting the radical levelling spirit of the times, a spirit which was encouraging the lower classes to take the government into their own hands.³⁴

If Crabbe is characterized as belonging to this school of thought then "The Patron" will be seen to imply only that ambition should be strongly tempered with resignation. But is this in fact the case? Many critics have read the poem in this light. As was seen, Huchon believed Crabbe wished to show the dangers of pride. Yet significantly enough, Crabbe gives the final words of the poem, not to the narrator, but to John's father. In this last speech Crabbe injects yet another interpretation of the conflict between the individual's ambition and social obduracy.

The speech of John's father at his son's grave is one of the keys to the poem. John's father has watched his son grow up, proud of his abilities, but afraid that the boy will fail because he lacks common sense. When John dies, his father gives vent to his pent-up feelings in a way which, while seeming to support the religious view that pride is a sin, actually undermines it:

"There lies my boy," he cried, "of care bereft,
And, Heav'n be praised, I've not a genius left:
No one among ye, sons! is doom'd to live
On high-raised hopes of what the great may give;
None, with exalted views and fortunes mean,
To die in anguish, or to live in spleen.
Your pious brother soon escaped the strife

³⁴William Wilberforce, A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians (1797); Hannah More, An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World (1791); Richard Yates, The Church in Danger (1815), and The Basis of National Welfare (1817); William Lisle Bowles, Thoughts on the Increase of Crimes, etc., (London, 1819).

Of such contention, but it cost his life;
 You then, my sons, upon yourselves depend,
 And in your own exertions find the friend"
 (lines 718-727).

John's resignation to death appears natural enough, especially when one recalls his training for the church. But when his father explains his own resignation to the death of his son, he carries the argument in a business-like way to its logical conclusion. What he says is that if the world has no place for people like John, then the world is better off without them. At this point the reader is suddenly jarred to the realization that this is not Crabbe's voice preaching the necessity of resignation. Something has seriously gone amiss if John's father is correct in his analysis that the world would be a happier and better place were there no people of genius in the lower classes.

John's father believes himself to be a realist. When he perceives that his son could be happy only if he were given an opportunity to use his education, and that such opportunities are rare, he concludes that the world would be better off without educated lower class people. But if this were to happen then poems such as "The Patron," written by people like John, would not exist. The reason why the world is better off without people of education like John, is that the rich, who control the educated sector, will not make room for the poor. John is resigned to death because he sees himself unfit for the world; but John's father is resigned because he sees the world is unfit for John.

John's father has yet one more point to make. In his logical manner, he draws the conclusion that, since people such as

John cannot rise above their station, no reason exists for bothering with the Lord Fredericks. If the social hierarchy does not benefit the poor man, then he should ignore it, and refuse to adapt himself to its conventions. Thus the resignation of John's father leads him to the conclusion that lower class people should not affect to copy the upper classes. Such advocacy was, of course, in direct contradiction to the teaching of Christian moralists such as Wilberforce and Hannah More, who believed that it was dangerous to allow the poor to develop their own working class ethos.³⁵ Wilberforce in particular pointed out that if the lower classes were left to their own devices, then they would ignore the teaching of the Christian religion, refuse to be resigned to their lot, and begin to demand equality. Wilberforce saw this potential social influence of the church as one of its main objectives. The church, he believed, taught the wealthy to be benevolent, but more important, it taught the poor to be acquiescent:

Softening the glare of wealth, and moderating the insolence of power, she renders the inequalities of the social state less galling to the lower orders, whom also she instructs, in their turn, to be diligent, humble, patient: reminding them that their more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God; that it is their part faithfully to discharge its duties, and contentedly to bear

³⁵ Compare William Lovett's comment, "So long, therefore, as those who are aiming at cheap and just government, help by vote or voice to place persons who have neither interest nor sympathy with them in the position of representatives or rulers, so long will they be putting obstacles in their own path. The industrious classes, therefore, would do well to . . . resolve to do their own work themselves." Life & Struggles of William Lovett In His Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom, ed. R.H. Tawney (London, 1920), II, 449.

its inconveniences; that the present state of things is very short; that the objects, about which wordly men conflict so eagerly, are not worth the contest; that the peace of mind, which Religion offers to all ranks indiscriminately, affords more true satisfaction than all the expensive pleasures which are beyond the poor man's reach; that in this view, however, the poor have the advantage, and that if their superiors enjoy more abundant comforts, they are also exposed to many temptations from which the inferior classes are happily exempted; that "having, food and raiment, they should be there- with content," for that their situation in life, with all its evils, is better than they have deserved at the hand of God Such are the blessed effects of Christianity on the temporal well-being of political communities.³⁶

Crabbe gently explodes such apologetics with the figure of John's father, standing over his son's grave, seriously thanking God for not sending him any more geniuses. Unwittingly this business man rebuts the argument of the Christian moralists when he calls upon his sons to ignore the benevolence of the upper classes and rely upon their own hard work. Had the lower classes complied, they would have deprived the gentry of any opportunity of influence. The attitude of John's father is not that of humility, but of ambition to succeed independently.

Obviously Crabbe's criticism of patronage was not the first of its kind. Johnson's famous letter to Lord Chesterfield (1755), in which he refused the noble Lord's belated offer, is often taken as the death blow of patronage. Yet with regard to relations between the lower and upper classes, patronage remained in existence well into the nineteenth century. Two years after

³⁶William Wilberforce, A Practical View, pp. 405-406.

the publication of Tales, Maria Edgeworth thought the subject important enough for a full scale condemnation in her novel Patronage -- an indictment running to four volumes. Interestingly enough, Miss Edgeworth also recommended that patronage should not be accepted, even if it were offered.

To understand the type of reaction aroused by such appeals to the poor as that of John's father, one has only to bring to mind that humorous scene in Bleak House where Mr. Rouncewell, the Iron-master, meets Sir Leicester Dedlock. Mr. Rouncewell believes that life in Chesney Wold would be unsuitable for Rosa were she to become his son's wife. Sir Leicester at first does not understand what Mr. Rouncewell can mean, since he believes that his family holds (in trust, of course!) all the best values of the nation. Mr. Rouncewell explains that Rosa's education, even though under the auspices of the Dedlock family, has been inappropriate to his son's way of life. He says to Sir Leicester: "I do not regard the village school as teaching everything desirable to be known by my son's wife" (Ch. xxviii). In saying this, he lays claim to values and knowledge that are outside the Dedlocks' perception, and thus breaks the great chain of society. Horrified, Sir Leicester is thrown into confusion by what he sees will lead to "obliterating the land-marks" of class and rank. I would suggest that in his speech at the end of the poem, John's father develops the same idea as Mr. Rouncewell. He advocates that the lower classes ignore the gentry and their concerns to begin building a new life for themselves on their own terms. In itself, the statement today may seem

innocuous enough, but to reactionaries such as Sir Leicester Dedlock, brought up to believe in the permanence of the class system, John's father would represent an extreme and radical point of view.

If what has been said so far about the poem is correct then clearly Crabbe does not attempt to state didactically any one particular solution to this problem of the individual in society. By implication, he shows that people such as John should be more careful, less confident. But he also indicates that Sir Frederick and his family owed a greater obligation to John than they were willing to admit. As in "Peter Grimes" Crabbe does not imply that an easy solution is possible; rather he indicates that a large number of people such as John are likely to meet the same fate. However the closing speech of John's father suggests that Crabbe could see a time when the working classes, by depending on their own values, would create a society in which familiar landmarks would be swept away, so that social ambition amongst the workers would no longer be dangerous, and even over-confident poets such as John might succeed. In "The Patron" Crabbe succeeded in maintaining all these conflicting views in tension with one another. However one cannot help noting that this achievement is gained at considerable cost. Crabbe's technique of constant qualification depends for its success on the sureness of the poetic description and the resilience of the irony. If these are at all lacking, as they seem to be at times in "The Patron," the juxtaposition of opposing attitudes does not lend the poem a sense of creative dialectic, but of weakness and enervation.

III

For some time now the conventional attitude towards Crabbe has been that he was both conservative and superficial, that his poetry abounds in outdated themes and conventions because he was incapable of perceiving the new influences of his time. Usually when this idea is advanced the critic gestures grandly to Crabbe's use of the heroic couplet, and with this non sequitur, closes the argument. Although this notion of Crabbe is slowly proving untenable, one still finds it being bandied about as current coin, often by influential critics. The most extreme summary of this opinion of Crabbe as a fusty, unthinking parson, somehow endowed with the poet's gift, is conveniently summarized in W.L. Renwick's volume of The Oxford History of English Literature:

Crabbe, traditionally the poet of the poor and unfortunate, aged twenty-two at the American revolution and thirty-five at the French, shows no inclination to revolutionary sentiment. The sight of the Gordon riots in 1780 may have shocked him, but indeed his middle-class disapproval of Jacobinism and clerical horror at infidelity signify merely that, like most people in this world, he had no real political convictions of his own or of any consequence. He had neither a philosophical doctrine to promulgate, nor personal complexes to sublimate nor obsessions to discharge, nor any vision to reveal of a spiritual cosmos or the destiny of man; he was not rapt into a poetic fury by any divine enthusiasm and celestial inspiration, nor called to spend laborious nights and days over any art that was long to learn.³⁷

One can agree with some of Renwick's points, for Crabbe was "not rapt into a poetic fury," but on the other hand, there is no reason

³⁷W.L. Renwick, English Literature 1789-1815 (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1963), p. 109.

why he should have been.

To account for such a wrong-headed view of Crabbe is by no means easy, and yet in large part it probably arises from the preconceptions readers bring to his poetry. As has been seen already, Crabbe's poetry is filled with nuances and changing "voices," which give many of his poems an elaborate form. To understand Crabbe's intentions one must first recognize that the form radically affects the meaning. To the reader who approaches Crabbe's narrative poems with the example of the novel or short story before him, believing the "story element" to be of primary importance, the poems may seem old-fashioned and monotonous. However their interest lies not only in the fortunes of the central characters, but also in the questions and issues which these characters raise.

In the three poems under discussion in this chapter -- "The Insanity of Ambitious Love," "The Patron," and "David Morris" -- one finds that in each case a young man attempts to rise above his station, and in each case this results in his suffering madness or death or both. To anyone looking only at the events of the story, as in a Walter Scott poem (or unfortunate enough to be guided by the Oxford History), Crabbe may well seem to be conservative, superficial and repetitive. Yet in each case the manner of presentation qualifies the events of the "story" to such an extent that one can no longer say that the tales are only about the failure of ambition. Crabbe's explanation of the reasons for failure are as important as the failures themselves.

In the case of "David Morris," another of the "new" poems from the John Murray MSS collection, Crabbe's presentation of "David's "failure" is so arranged that the poem suggests a new method of evaluating success may be required. In "David Morris" Crabbe once again presents several different views about the value of ambition. Yet like that of "The Insanity of Ambitious Love," the conclusion of "David Morris" is somewhat puzzling; instead of resolving the issues raised it introduces new problems which add to the reader's perplexity about Crabbe's own intentions. My aim is to investigate "David Morris" to see how Crabbe's rendering of the theme of ambition differs from that of a published poem such as "The Patron," and then perhaps to suggest a possible reason why Crabbe did not authorize its publication.

Since our reaction to David is of fundamental importance to an interpretation of the poem, it will be helpful to begin by examining closely Crabbe's portrayal of David. One of the most interesting features is that Crabbe does not attempt to weight the scales against David as he does with John in "The Patron." The language chosen is neutral, so that the reader cannot predict David's future as he could that of John by means of Crabbe's ominous comments on the danger of romantic values. David is an open-ended character, one who has many possible ways of development.

Born into a humble station, David Morris is yet another of the Crabbe figures who aim at gaining a position of respectable independence. David's situation differs from that of both the

madman and John, who are also from the lower class, in that he is the natural son of a rich lord who fell in love with a peasant woman. At birth David has one foot in the peerage and the other in the farmyard. Novelists at this time were especially fond of portraying doubtfully legitimate children who undergo numerous reversals of fortune while separated from their wealthy parents. Tom Jones, Humphry Clinker and Evelina are some of the most obvious examples. In these novels, the child's success was made dependent on his finding his parents and their recognition of him. Since to David depends on the help he received from his father, clearly Crabbe is working within this tradition, but as will be seen presently, Crabbe introduces significant innovations.

The first thing one notices is the care and sympathy with which Crabbe presents David's mother and father. David's story begins when Kezia, "a Peasant's Daughter," comes from her village to serve at the Hall of a noble lady. The lady's son, young and unmarried, soon falls in love with Kezia, and she with him. Genuinely in love, the Lord does not treat Kezia as a servant in the Hall, plying her with false promises, but sets her up handsomely in "a quiet Seat" near the town. Nor is the affair described as short and nasty:

Her Lord was still her Lover, true and strong
Was his Affection, and it lasted long
(lines 154-155).

Moreover Crabbe's sketch of Kezia hints that he wished his readers to judge her tolerantly. He points out that she is a "Pamela in Face and Heart, / But not with Pamela's firm mind or Art" (lines

138-139). Since Pamela's "Art" has never been highly respected, Crabbe is indicating that Kezia, unlike Pamela, is innocent and trusting.³⁸ This sketch of a happy extra-marital relationship should be enough to refute those who believe that Crabbe's position as a clergyman prevented him from sympathizing with such relationships. Crabbe was by no means narrow and puritanical, but his experience of the world had shown him that such relationships rarely survived. More important, were they to break up, they caused harm to the children. His point in "David Morris" is not to condemn David's father and mother, but to trace the effect of their thoughtlessness on David.

David's early years with his mother are close to idyllic. Since his father is deeply in love with Kezia, and keeps her well supplied with everything she wants, David is able to enjoy a pleasant childhood in a home which embodies the best values of both his parents' worlds. But after about ten years the Lord's love for David's mother grows cold, and he ceases to provide for her so generously. Finally David and his mother move to a small cottage where they live alone with the help only of a small annuity. The remainder of the poem is devoted to exploring how David faces his new way of life.

³⁸In a letter to Crabbe, April 12, 1821, Mary Leadbeater said: "I wonder that so good a man as Richardson should have written that dangerous book, 'Pamela.' I met with one volume when I was young; my mother also met with it, and committed it to the flames. A sketch of the story was told to a young girl here the other day. I enjoyed her honest surprise, when, opening her fine black eyes to their full dimensions, she exclaimed, 'And would she marry him?'" The Leadbeater Papers, II, 374.

In the early part of the poem Crabbe portrays David in similar terms to John of "The Patron." For instance when David is sent to school amongst the village boys he finds his companions intolerably boorish:

Crabbe David at School looked round in pure Disdain
Of all he saw, nor could his Wrath restrain;
Vulgar and rude were all, their chief Employ
To play the Tyrant o'er the weaker Boy,
By every Insult Anger to excite,
Then call the Injured to unequal Fight
(lines 194-199).

In these lines the reader is by no means asked to see David as a snob; tyrannical school bullies are proper objects of contempt. Moreover when Crabbe shows David breaking away from his mother's guidance and control, he gives David good reasons. Because of feelings of guilt and the need for consolation, David's mother joins a dissenting religious group, whose stern and narrow rules shut her heart against her son. The preacher assures her of salvation if she will obey the rules of the sect; this in turn becomes her answer to David's problems. David, however, who has inherited his father's intelligence, refuses to be duped by the false prophet and stands his ground against him. At this point Crabbe makes abundantly clear that he respects, and wishes his readers to respect, the way in which David refutes the false religion of the fanatical preacher. David's initial distrust is justified later in the story when Crabbe depicts the preacher after his marriage to David's mother:

He went, and found his Mother's Master there,
Who in her Zeal or in her Weakness gave
Power to her Guide to treat her as a Slave.

He was no more the gentle Guide and Friend,
 Who to her Fears and Scruples would attend;
 His Cares of such domestic kind were closed,
 On whom an hundred Consciences reposed.
 Yet to her Son in loving Words he spoke,
 And gently tried to bring him to the Yoke
 (lines 346-354).

Crabbe obviously shared David's disdain for the preacher.³⁹

David "boldly to his Speech replied, / Opposed his Arguments, his
 Facts denied, / And held in utter Scorn his Mother's Friend &
 Guide" (lines 355-357).

The portrait of David Morris gives the impression that Crabbe composed it with the sole intention of accurately mapping the motives and feelings of David's life. The story, at the beginning at least, is told for its own intrinsic interest rather than to illustrate a theme. For instance when David writes to his father asking for help, Crabbe had two literary stereotypes from which to choose. He could have painted the Lord black, and have him reject David, or white, and have him recognize David. Instead he offers a subtle character portrait of David's father in which the usual values of the stereotype are inverted. David's father refuses to consider the possibility of recognizing David as his son, but David's clever letter so impresses him that he goes to the unusual length of

³⁹Crabbe's dislike of dissenting groups which taught that good works were of no consequence to man's salvation is well known. His severest attack on this doctrine is to be found in The Borough (Letter IV) where he inveighs against William Huntington in particular. This animosity seems to have developed when he returned from Suffolk to his Muston parish in 1805 to find his church membership much depleted by the efforts of the Wesleyans and Huntingdonians. No doubt some of Crabbe's irritation was caused by feelings of guilt that his absence had been partially responsible for the growth of dissent.

obtaining a place in the church for him.⁴⁰ As was noted in "The Patron," the Church of England offered one of the readiest ways of providing young but impoverished gentlemen with a "respectable" profession.

Most people at this time as desperate as David would have accepted the offer at once; but David, a man of some character, is looking for an honourable place, and has scruples about subscribing to all the tenets of the church. When he refuses the offer, saying that he cannot join the church when he does not believe all its creed, Crabbe notes the surprise of the lawyer. The lawyer asks David why he cannot do as other men: "What then? you can at least comply" (line 329). This short episode indicates that what looks like a "good" offer on the part of David's father hardly has the best interests of the church at heart. Moreover Crabbe points out that David's refusal to join the church is a genuine matter of conscience, and although he gives David a pragmatic reason as well, the reader is meant to sympathize with David's act of conscience:

Poor David briefly on the Subject mused,
Then deeply sighed, but steadily refused,
In part by Conscience led, yet thinking, too,
There must be something that my Lord wd do
(lines 335-338).

In discussing Peacock's decision in 1819 to enter the East India Company, Howard Mills notes that as a result of the new church

⁴⁰The significance of the letter becomes plain when one recalls that few uneducated people could write at this period. David's ability to write an elegant letter makes him somewhat unique. The blood of his father shows through in spite of his humble station. For a discussion of letter writing amongst the lower classes, see E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 712-716.

reforms, "one could less easily settle into the Church."⁴¹ David's decision not to enter the church was made for much the same reasons as Peacock and Southey made theirs: David's "rational" outlook does not allow him, even passively, to accept the dogma of the church. I do not wish to under-estimate the second reason for David's refusal of the church -- he hoped his father would do more -- but to point out the sympathy that Crabbe wanted his readers to feel for the strength of will David shows in following his conscience. Even the Lord's lawyer is impressed with David's idealism: "The Man unwilling from the Door retired, / And much condemned the Rashness he admired" (lines 339-340). David's conscientious refusal of a church place is not to be despised, especially when one considers the strong anti-latitudinarian opinions prevalent when Crabbe wrote this poem.

After 1810 the Church of England came under strong attack from reformers who claimed that it was a state institution supplying jobs to men who did not believe strongly in the Thirty-nine Articles.⁴² Vicars were often noted, not so much for their adherence to Christ's, as to the squire's table.⁴³ No doubt at

⁴¹Howard Mills, Peacock: his Circle and his Age, p. 52.

⁴²The church of course had been under attack all through the eighteenth century. The difference was that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the attacks began to take effect. The bishops demanded that clergymen reside in their own parishes. Significantly enough, Crabbe himself was affected by the new reforms. His bishop, Dr. Prettyman, urged "all non-resident incumbents to return to their livings," and although Crabbe was given leave to stay an extra four years in Suffolk, he finally had to return to Muston. See Life, Ch. vii, pp. 169-170.

⁴³Jane Austen's Mr. Collins, who is dependent on Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is one of many examples.

times serious abuses crept in as well, when men who were quite unfit to administer the needs of a parish donned the cloth through influence. For the most part, however, criticism rested on the grounds that the priests, although they might be good men, were not zealous Christians.⁴⁴ William Blake was only one of many to condemn the general level of Christianity at this time: "All the Commentators on the Bible are Dishonest Designing Knaves, who in hopes of a good living adopt the State religion I could name an hundred such."⁴⁵ Since Crabbe was certainly aware of this type of criticism, his portrayal of David's idealistic refusal to join the church indicates that he wished his readers to take David's plight seriously. Far from being a debauched or frivolous free-thinker, David's principles are worthier than those of a good many churchmen.

However good his motives, David does not benefit by them, since he has overestimated his father's desire to help; when he refuses the position in the church, his father does not offer him anything else. David is once more thrown upon his own resources. Crabbe now shows David entering a time of doubt, when he questions the rightness of the world. A friend and he hold long discussions on freewill, fate, and foreknowledge. Because they are poor, the two men feel themselves utterly set apart from the rest of mankind:

⁴⁴The Oxford Movement was formed to help counter the effects of latitudinarianism.

⁴⁵William Blake, "Annotations to Watson," Letter II, in The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, p. 390.

"What Good," they asked, "can rise
 From Man's Distresses, Wants and Miseries?
 How is it thus, that what we warmly love
 And fondly seek! should our Distruction prove?
 Is there a Power above, who feels it right
 To give the Wish, and mock the Appetite?
 To tempt with Pleasure Man's aspiring Soul,
 And then by Laws restrain him, and Controul?
 Is it his Pleasure that, in Reasoning thus,
 We nothing solve, & all that we discuss
 Proves that he is, not what he is to us?
 Is he a Father? why his Children vex?
 Is he a Guide, why puzzle and perplex?
 A Friend! why friendless do we then complain?
 A King, and Wretches groan beneath his Reign?
 And whence comes Evil?"

(lines 394-409).

Although he questions the quality of God's creation, David is by no means the usual type of freethinker that one finds in Crabbe's poetry -- a man naturally inclined to immorality and viciousness. David is an intellectual, even though an undisciplined one; his questions arise in the first place, not because he is an enemy of the church, but because he was too honest to debase himself (and thus the church) by hypocritically turning priest. How significant David's questions are meant to be Crabbe never directly says. The narrator believes them to be the outpourings of "nervous Men." But curiously enough, the narrator himself makes no attempt to rebut them; he contents himself by comparing them to Satan's questions, in hell, and concludes that they are unhelpful:

Such the fruitful themes
 Of nervous Men with melancholy Dreams,
 Who, when their Wants demand their utmost Care,
 Ask Why they want, and swell the Load they bear
 (lines 409-412).

To a modern reader, that a person in poverty should ask such questions does not seem at all unnatural. Perhaps at the time Crabbe began

his career in the 1780's, the narrator's attitude towards David would have been that of the majority of the population, but even then, many people were beginning to feel that such questions deserved an answer. Paley certainly thought so when he included his famous apology for social inequality in Moral and Political Philosophy (1785). While socialists such as Thomas Spence may have been laughed at as foolish Utopians, their "foolishness" caused them to spend a great deal of time in prison. And certainly by the second decade of the nineteenth century the narrator's refusal to take David seriously is no longer representative of contemporary attitudes to such questions. By this time the tide of reform had begun to sweep forward causing many people such as David to question the age-old theological answers. The narrator would have David resign himself to his misfortunes by making the best of a bad world, but this is to dismiss David's questions, not to answer them. Thus the unanswered questions retain their full impact. I do not wish to argue that David's questions are in any way unusually profound. Obviously they are not; but equally obviously, they were and are frequently asked. Once the question of inequality seriously raises its ugly head, and in David's case the question is raised seriously, then a stage in the argument has been reached when the answer of the Christian apologist -- that one must have resignation -- no longer satisfies.

Once God's plan of the world has been thrown open to dispute, the next step is to question man's social order. Many people in the eighteenth century saw that even if one no longer believed a

logical connection existed between God's harmony and man's social harmony (in other words, if one were not the mirror image of the other), the interests of society demanded that man pretend such a relation existed.⁴⁶ If a man begins to doubt the existence of a divine plan of the universe then, psychologically, his readiness to accept the status quo is also weakened. When David and his friend go into the country they are no longer content with the beauty of the flocks and herds. Metaphysical questions lead them to ask economic ones:

Why toils the Peasant, & why feasts the Lord?
 Why Flocks & Herds are feeding calmly round,
 And We in anxious Cares & Grievs abound?
 (lines 433-435)

In these lines Crabbe reiterates an argument he had used many years before in The Village:

I grant indeed that fields and flocks have charms
 For him that grazes or for him that farms
 (I. 39-40).

Moreover he still accepted that people like David were driven to seek reform because they could not find adequate work. In a letter to Mary Leadbeater in 1819, he said:

We are quiet in this part of the land,
 and in fact our tumults depend not
 upon politics, but the employment of the
 inhabitants. If they have work, they
 are peaceable and loyal; if not, they
 are whigs, rebels, and reformists.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Tillotson had said, "I doubt not but hypocrisy is a great wickedness and very odious to God, but by no means of so pernicious example as open profaneness. Hypocrisy is a more modest way of sinning" Sermon III in The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, 10th ed. (London, 1735) I, 40.

⁴⁷Letter to Mary Leadbeater, November 5, 1819, in The Leadbeater Papers, II, 363-364.

The distinction should be made that in The Village it is Crabbe who objects to the economic situation, while in "David Morris" Crabbe gives these questions to David. Yet Crabbe is by no means unsympathetic to David. Indeed, as the poem developed, Crabbe seems to have identified his own beliefs more closely with those of David. For instance, in a comment on David's inability to find beauty in the countryside, Crabbe had originally said:

Herds Flocks & Flowers can no Delight bestow
On him who more than Heavn permits would know.⁴⁸

But Crabbe rejected these lines, and thus deliberately deleted an argument much used at that time to support inequality. Had Crabbe not deleted the lines, the narrator, for whom Crabbe had originally intended them, would have argued that David could take no pleasure in pastoral beauties because of his concern with problems which were not his business, and which in any case could not be solved. This appeal to authority is not very convincing today, but had Crabbe allowed it to stand he would have introduced a level of argument which for many people in the nineteenth century would have had the appearance of discrediting David's questions. Crabbe's reason for rejecting the lines is unknown, but in so doing he clearly strengthened David's arguments.

David combines qualities which would have made him greatly feared at this period; he is an educated idealist whose ambition and poverty cause him to ask questions about the class system. In the Tory periodicals, David would have been represented as a wicked

⁴⁸ See Textual Notes of New Poems by George Crabbe, p. 167.

Radical. Yet Crabbe does not allow David to become a revolutionary villain. For instance, when nothing turns up to help David towards independence, he takes to walking the streets of London:

Now what Resource, Friends none, Books few and dull,
 Void of Enjoyments, Of Reflections full,
 Through many an unknown Street, in many a day,
 Has he past on, unmindful of his Way,
 Without a Purpose, glad of all Events
 That could engage him, all those Accidents
 That London Crowds produce, the Fray, the Fire,
 All that could make him from himself retire,
 Trifles that made him in his passing stop,
 Books on the Stall, or Pictures in the Shop,
 And Suppliants, such as in their Look & Tone
 Made him exclaim: "I suffer not alone",
 Lanes, Allies, Streets, where dwellings poor & mean,
 And Vice and squalid Poverty are seen,
 And what the fairer Streets, that hide the Woes
 That narrow Lanes and wretched Courts disclose
 (lines 465-480).

As these lines indicate, David has become part of the great London mob, that vast assemblage of unemployed which could be quickly gathered together as it was in 1780 to attack the Bank of England and open the doors of Newgate. Part of the reason why people spoke so contemptuously of "the mob" was that they believed it consisted wholly of the undeserving poor, those people who refused to work for a living. But Crabbe, who had himself witnessed the Gordon Riots in 1780⁴⁹ when he was there as one of the unemployed, knew only too well that much of the reason for the ill health and ill manners of the mob was that they were deprived of the means of making a

⁴⁹See Crabbe's account of the Gordon Riots in the entry for June 8, 1780, of "The Poet's Journal," in *Life*, Ch. iii, pp. 81-84. Yet it should be noted that this entry does not appear in the original MS of Crabbe's diary, and as no leaves have been removed between the entries for June 6 and June 11, I can only assume that Crabbe's son has transcribed the entry for June 8 from another source.

decent living.

One should recall that David is reduced to walking the streets of London because he cannot find a position fit for a gentleman. The strength of this feeling amongst people with talent and ambition, that a life of labour was a life of waste, can be easily forgotten today when labour has its "due reward." But in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an educated man with no money or friends was in an extremely difficult situation. When Burke spoke of the value of independence, and remarked that, "Independence of mind will ever be more or less influenced by independence of fortune,"⁵⁰ he was commenting on one of the strongest of all eighteenth century beliefs. For David to accept a job in commerce or business was to forfeit not only his status in society, but his independence as well. Fielding had already described a similar situation in his portrait of Booth in Amelia, and Miss Burney had dealt with the problem at some length in the figure of Belfield in her novel Cecilia. But the novelists of the eighteenth century could offer no solution to the problem. Invariably in these novels the discovery is made that the hero is the rich heir of some obscure relation, or if this is not the case, then some benevolent gentleman takes it upon himself to find him a place. One of the first poets to delve deeply into this problem of the educated unemployed, Crabbe goes to the centre of the problem by raising the question of the rightness of the economic order. Whereas Fanny Burney has Macartney fall into melodramatic hysteria in which he

⁵⁰ Edmund Burke, "Speech on a Bill for Shortening the Duration of Parliaments," in Works, VI, 137.

contemplates taking to the highway in Macheath style, Crabbe has David Morris begin to question the rightness of a society which cannot absorb or make use of his talent.

David stands not for one isolated instance of the educated poor, but for a whole host of such people, a class, one might even say. With his noble father and his peasant mother, David is an example of that curious hybrid which began to appear in large numbers in the first decades of the nineteenth century -- the educated working class person with taste. As has been seen in The Borough (Letter VIII), Crabbe highly praised the self-educated weaver who happily spent his leisure hours collecting insects. Many people at this time were struck by the number of working people and lower middle class tradesmen who were gaining an excellent education.⁵¹ E.P. Thompson has described the self-education of these artisans:

There was certainly a leaven amongst the northern weavers of self-educated and articulate men of considerable attainments. Every weaving district had its weaver-poets, biologists, mathematicians, musicians, geologists, botanists There are northern museums and natural history societies which still possess records or collections of lepidoptera built up by weavers; while there are accounts of weavers in isolated villages who taught themselves geometry by chalking on their flagstones, and who were eager to discuss the differential calculus.⁵²

Francis Place, a tailor, and Samuel Bamford, a weaver, are two outstanding examples. Yet even while self-education amongst the

⁵¹For instance Hannah More thought she had discovered a genius in Mrs. Anne Yearsley, a poor milkwoman who wrote poetry, and for whom she collected a subscription of about £500.

⁵²E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 291-292.

lower classes was growing apace, the most well known humanitarians of the time still attempted to prevent their pupils from gaining the type of education that would have fitted them for better jobs.⁵³ Even amongst those people willing to praise the autodidact, few were willing to take the next step of recommending that the working classes be given opportunities to use their education in important and responsible capacities. As late as the 1840's, Mrs. Gaskell, who was sympathetic towards the aspirations of the working classes, and who saw that artisans were capable of educating themselves, limited the ambitions of her workers in Mary Barton to specialist hobbies. But a hobby is something which one does in addition to a permanent job. An education which can be used only in such a tangential manner does not supply the basic need of contributing to the community in a useful and purposive endeavour.

Crabbe appears to have realized what little satisfaction hobbies gave to men who wanted to use their abilities in and for society. At the beginning of "David Morris" the narrator's friend points out how David could not find enough purpose in dilattente hobbies:

He saw with some Contempt and some Surprise
Those who on Beetles doat and Butterflies,
The Moss exploring, Shell-collecting Tribe,
That Learning stoops to class and to describe,
Pickers of Lichen from old Walls and Trees

⁵³ Looking back in 1823 at her campaign to instruct the lower classes, Hannah More was appalled to see that they were now being taught to write, and what was worse, taught on Sundays how to write. She commented, "This is a regular apprenticeship to sin." Letter to William Wilberforce, 1823, in The Letters of Hannah More, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London, 1925), p. 202.

And weeds cast up, the Refuse of the Seas,
 Fanciers of Fossils, Watchers of the Worm
 Enshrined to see it in its flying Form,

. . .

With all those patient Triflers who acquire
 On easy terms the Fame which they desire
 (lines 68-83).

David refused to compromise his ideals with hobbies, which, while interesting in themselves, did not actually bring him into the mainstream of society. When it is recalled that Crabbe himself was no mean botanist, and a keen collector of fossils, David's refusal to become absorbed in such hobbies takes on even more significance. Crabbe must have realized from his own experience that, while interesting, hobbies were no substitute for a responsible position.

In many ways David personifies the best qualities of the advanced intellectual, for his studies have not cut him off from the rest of mankind. At this time when most of England was still concerned to separate the worthy from the unworthy poor in order to determine those who should be helped, David's ideas are truly liberal:

Poor as he was, and, as I much suspect,
 Could tell sad Stories of the World's Neglect,
 Yet has he Kindness to a Sufferer shown,
 And eased their Grief, though burthened with his own.
 Not that the Good alone his Bounty shared;
 For Woes, not Virtues, he his Pittence spared.

Perhaps he thought, with Justice Shallow's Man,
 Knaves cannot beg as honest paupers can;
 An honest Man in Want can boldly plead,
 When a poor Rogue has of Assistance need
 (lines 84-93).

Crabbe has intentionally described David as a progressive and liberal person in advance of his time. Yet in spite of all his

good qualities -- his intelligence and compassion -- society will not allow David the status and position due his merit.

It is not surprising that Crabbe described David sympathetically, since the pattern of David's life follows closely that of Crabbe's youth. Like David, Crabbe's early education gave him hopes of a life better than his father could offer; like David again, Crabbe joined a club where he used to hold long discussions about the nature of the universe. Upon the completion of his medical apprenticeship, Crabbe had been angry to find that he had no option but to return to Aldborough and help his father roll butter casks on the quays. As he admits himself, this anger at the world for not supplying him a place was unreasonable, but unreasonable or not, the strength of the anger was unmitigated.⁵⁴ At the beginning of "David Morris," the friend of the narrator says:

We knew not what could lead him to dispise
The humble Profits that from Office rise,
But he contemptuous spoke of Customs and Excise
(lines 7-9).

Crabbe however was not in any doubt. Since his father had been a customs officer like David, Crabbe knew only too well how David might despise the "humble Profits" of a small government post and why it would seem degrading. Moreover at the beginning of the poem Crabbe alludes to Burns's small government post, and comments: "Yet well might He disdain his Country's Thrift, / Proud of her Poet, sordid in her Gift" (lines 12-13).

⁵⁴Life, Ch. ii, pp. 29-32.

At the end of "The Patron" Crabbe is successfully able to present John's humble resignation to death because John is so poetic and frail that we never really expect him to learn to cope with the world. Crabbe however shows far more sympathy with David, who is made of sterner stuff, and who, after a period of rebellion, decides to swallow his pride and become a good customs officer. A great breakthrough, such a resolution shows that David has accepted his position and plans to better it by means of his own labour. Unlike many of Crabbe's characters, David manages to learn, and to some extent benefit, from his experiences. Unfortunately David's early speculations about the injustice of the world soon prove true when his hard work comes to nought:

Still was he poor, and found his Efforts vain
 An higher Station by his Care to gain.
 Another gained it, though he laboured less;
 Interest, not Merit, there insured Success
 (lines 539-542).

Only when David has attempted to better his life by his own efforts, and has failed, does Crabbe show him falling into immorality. Even then, Crabbe attributes David's decline into immorality to the effect of social pressures rather than to any lack of will on David's part to improve himself:

He grew Remiss, His duties were declined,
 Indulged his Senses, & debased his Mind.
 He saw how Gain was made, and owned no Law
 That bad him shun the Evil Acts he saw;
 Then, overcome, he took a bolder View
 Of what he could, as others round him, do;
 If Conscience murmured, and his Spirits failed,
 These Wine inflamed, & over that prevailed
 (lines 545-552).

David is not a criminal by nature, but unable to find a place for himself in society, he eventually ends up with no allegiances, feeling no obligations to obey any of society's laws.

The one thing which might have helped David to accept his position, and allow him to find happiness, the love of a woman, is also denied him. Once again the fact of his birth intervenes:

'Twas not his Fate the favourite Nymph to see,
With whom he wished the favourite Swain to be;
This Pride and Poverty forbade, his Pride
Union with those in humble State denied,
And Want his prouder Wish; The untaught Fair
Filled him with Scorn, th' accomplished with Dispair
(lines 525-530).

While disliking the idea of marrying some uneducated woman from the lower classes, he has insufficient money to win the hand of an educated woman. Unable to form any loyalties, David throws in his lot with what he takes to be the blind amoral forces of society.

Up till this point then, Crabbe would seem to sympathize with David's difficulties, but as soon as the narrator begins to explain his own part in David's life, he suggests that David's ambition was blameworthy and that he should have resigned himself to his station. Much the same thing occurred, it will be recalled, in "The Insanity of Ambitious Love." The role of the narrator is somewhat puzzling; Crabbe introduces him as a sympathetic person who appears to have experienced some of the same troubles as David:

'Twas at this Time my Knowledge of the Man
And my Compassion for his State began.
This I related with my Wish to raise
His fallen Mind by Views of brighter Days;
To me the Symptoms of his Case were known,
Signs of Disease that Once had been my own
(lines 607-612).

Since the narrator is a representative of religion, one would expect Crabbe to endorse him rather than David. And in part, this is what happens, for as soon as the narrator learns of David's despondency, he attempts to convince him of "Man's true State." At this point one would expect that Crabbe is about to expand the structure of the poem to admit other perspectives on David's position. Till now the poem has been told from David's point of view. Although Crabbe has presented David's story through a narrator, and has thus distanced David considerably from the reader, the reasons for David's plight have been portrayed sympathetically enough to convince the reader of the good reasons for David's inability to find a place for himself in society. When the narrator begins his comments on David, however, Crabbe appears about to undercut the effect of the early part of the poem by showing that David's story of a rigid and unjust society is only one interpretation. The surprise is that the poem does not support the narrator's position; at the end, the reader sympathizes more with David's refusal to bow to the status quo than with the narrator's insistence that all men must resign themselves to their station. The ending of the poem, one of the most perceptive pieces Crabbe ever wrote, would suggest that he expressed his own sympathies and feelings in his characters, at the expense of orthodoxy, to a far greater degree than has been suspected.

The emphasis upon religion at the end of "David Morris" is to be found in many of Crabbe's other poems. It will be recalled that in "The Hall of Justice" Crabbe had transformed the originally

secular question into religious terminology. And of course both "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" and "The Patron" have explicitly religious endings. It was remarked earlier that the ending of "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" fails because Jacques' brief answer cannot compete with the powerful story of the madman, and because Jacques himself seems to lack the charity of a truly religious person. In "David Morris" however, the narrator develops his arguments at some length with David; moreover he seems moved to offer David help out of genuine altruism. Yet in spite of the amount of space devoted to the narrator's argument, it does not (as Jacques' did not) impress the reader as a satisfactory conclusion to the questions raised. As was the case with "The Patron," the poem invites the reader to draw his own conclusions from a comparison of the different answers given to the problem of ambition.

The narrator certainly meets with no success when he attempts to instruct David in the condition of "Man's true State":

I strove to soothe him, Chose him Books, and read,
 But his Desire and Love of Truth were fled.
 He neither granted nor denied the Proof
 Of Man's true State! but would reply: "Enough!
 It may be so! but all is dark to me.
 I've neither Power to argue, nor t' agree."
 (lines 613-618).

David's reply can be interpreted in several different ways. It may mean simply that he cannot understand the proof, or that he does not want to understand. Again, his answer may mean that he has heard the argument before, and finds it unconvincing; or that, while the argument is convincing, the opposing arguments are equally convincing. What is clear is that the narrator's religion is

irrelevant to David. David is not a vain and dogmatic atheist who rejects the narrator's arguments out of spite. Crabbe has already prepared the reader to see David as an intellectual who has read and studied the problems:

His Books we knew not, but with us were found
 Some who conceived their Tenets were unsound;
 The Care he took that None those Books should find
 Were held as Proof of their pernicious Kind.
 His Sabbaths all to him were Days of Rest,
 He no Religion had, or none profest,
 Seldom at Church, he never found a Seat
 Where Congregations of Dissenters meet;
 Hence as an Atheist they the Man reviled,
 Who at their Censures and their Judgment smiled,
 For well he knew how they the Man condemn,
 The Wretch, who walks not in their Path with them
 (lines 28-39).

This passage offers a comment on David's religion (and Crabbe is deliberately vague whether David is religious or not) as well as the religion of all those people who condemn a man because he reads books or because he "walks not in their Path." David is deliberately made to appear far superior to the ordinary religious dogmatist.

Crabbe has also portrayed David as being at least the intellectual equal of the narrator himself. When David talked to the narrator about committing suicide, the narrator did not comprehend his seriousness: "He talked of Death, but, as it then appear'd, / There were in him no Symptoms to be feared" (lines 623-624). The narrator thus answers David with the easy assurance that "Temperance & Care will Health restore." David snaps back with a fine retort:

"For what?", said he, "My comforts live no more,
And when our Dwelling we no longer love,
What Law on Earth forbids us to remove?"

(lines 626-628)

The narrator, candidly admitting that he cannot answer these arguments, is forced to reply with what he knows to be a commonplace -- "Who quits his Post is sure to meet Disgrace." Refusing to accept banalities, David asks, "Disgrace with Whom?" and with a masterly touch, finishes with a quotation from Spenser: "When weary Mortals die, / Let none ask How, or whence, or where, or Why" (lines 633-634). Undoubtedly David has the best of the argument. In spite of the narrator's avowal that he has experienced the same problems as David, obviously he has not plumbed them to their solution; for he cannot satisfactorily answer David. Crabbe's realization of the situation leaves no doubt that David has routed the narrator:

Smiling he spoke, and earnest I replied:
"The Poet's Verse is not the Sinner's Guide."
And thus we parted -- "Think not I forget",
He said, "your Kindness, 'tis One pleasing Debt,
And proves there's Love in Man." -- My Leave I took,
And left poor David to his Bed and Book
(lines 635-640).

Again, however, Crabbe portrays David in a positive light: David rejects the narrator's religion, but accepts his offer of human kindness. Today David would be described, in the best sense of the word, as a humanist.

It might be thought that Crabbe would not agree with David's statement that no one knows what will happen to man after death. But this is not necessarily so. In the figure of David, Crabbe seems to be projecting some of his own doubts. Writing to

Miss Elizabeth Charter in July 1816, Crabbe said: "When thoughts of the fate of those near to me enter my Mind, I confess I banish them as quickly as I can, leaving this mysterious Subject as unrevealed and inexplicable. God is good I say and think no more, that is I dare not think."⁵⁵ Moreover it will be recalled that in The Borough (Letter IV) Crabbe discusses some of the views offered to explain what happens to man after death. He places special emphasis on those who believe that in the next world God will reward those who have "improvement gain'd" in this world. About this view he comments:

A pleasing vision! could we thus be sure
Polluted souls would be at length so pure;
The view is happy, we may think it just,
It may be true -- but who shall add it must?
To the plain words and sense of sacred writ,
With all my heart I reverently submit;
But, where it leaves me doubtful, I'm afraid
To call conjecture to my reason's aid;
Thy thoughts, thy ways, great God! are not as mine,
And to thy mercy I my soul resign

(IV. 200-209).

Yet is this view not the usual Christian explanation of what happens to man after death? Crabbe in these lines is casting doubt on what he considers to be an overly optimistic view that if man is good in this world he will be rewarded in the next. Thus when David says that man does not know what happens to him after death, Crabbe would seem to sympathize.

The ending to "David Morris" is puzzling because one would expect Crabbe to speak through the narrator, and yet as has been

⁵⁵Letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter, July 18, 1816, in The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 139.

seen, the narrator does not come off particularly well from the argument with David. Nor is it clear that Crabbe is employing the narrator as a persona; the narrator's approach to religion resembles Crabbe's fairly closely. In a letter written the year before his death, Crabbe cautioned his son on the dangers of theological argument, and explained his own procedure: "I would not, in the State of my Mind -- so soon confused by Argument as it really is -- enter into a conversational -- Debate with any & especially any zealous Contender for his own Opinions -- my Way is to study the Point -- whatever it may be, -- by myself & such Books as I would consult & even then I leave off as soon as I feel in any degree confused."⁵⁶ And about his own convictions, Crabbe wrote:

Conscious that I never shall arrive at the very Truth & that there will remain Difficulty in some Questions & Uncertainty in some points more or less important I rest quietly in those Facts which Reason assents to unforced and as I believe, unbiassed & these are sufficient to keep my Mind at Peace.⁵⁷

Like the narrator, Crabbe dislikes arguing about his religion, since he feels inadequate to defend it well. Crabbe's uncertainty arises from his ability to see that on theological questions absolute certitude may not be possible. It is hardly surprising then to find in a poem such as "David Morris," where the central character claims to be uncertain about man's destiny, that neither David nor the narrator appears to win an outright victory. As happens with many great artists, Crabbe's own sympathies have become divided

⁵⁶Letter from George Crabbe to his son George, February 4, 1831, in F.M. Link ed., "Three Crabbe Letters," ELN, II (1965), 205.

⁵⁷"Three Crabbe Letters," ELN, II (1965), 205-206.

between two characters, and in their conflict, Crabbe acts out the disquiet in his own mind.

Nonplussed, the narrator leaves David, and once again reiterates his own struggles with the problem of doubt. Yet when the narrator was unable to help or convince David, it is unlikely that a soliloquy of after-thoughts will be any more convincing to the reader:

Yet thought I much, for I before had grieved
 For what I doubted, nay, for what believed,
 For my Belief was clouded, and my Doubt
 Made cold, Belief, Devotion undevout,
 And kept me with perturbed & anxious Mind,
 Seeking for Rest, but not with Hope to find,
 Till One dear Friend, the Friend of all his Race,
 Led me to see the Truth, & to embrace
 (lines 641-648).

Certainly the narrator believes sincerely that his own views are correct and David's wrong; he is too ingenuous to be guilty of hypocrisy. But one does question whether he was convinced of the soundness of his views by force of argument or because of his will to believe. All the narrator can do to help David is to leave him at a time when he needs help and rush off to find the "One dear Friend, the Friend of all his Race," who had helped to dispel his own doubts. One is left with the suspicion that even had the "One dear Friend" arrived in time to speak to David, he would have been able to accomplish little. If one person only can defend Christianity, this says little for the quality of belief amongst the rest of Christendom.

Even if the narrator's qualifications as a teacher of Christian doctrine are disregarded for the moment, one finds it

difficult to see how the religious answer could serve as an adequate solution to David's problems. Part of the reason is that Crabbe has juxtaposed the narrator's advocacy of resignation with David's own resignation. When David commits suicide he is practising his own brand of resignation -- to death, not life. The greatness of Crabbe's depiction lies in the manner in which he shows David, after years of effort in the attempt to gain happiness, quietly deciding that he cannot win, and opting out. For David, the narrator's advice to give up his ambition is defeatist; David prefers to end his life rather than to live a failure. The narrator believes that the only type of resignation is that of obedience to the church. But David's calm, philosophical death (one is tempted to use the adjective serene) reveals another type of resignation, that of refusing to compromise one's ideals. As Hume pointed out in his essay on suicide, if man does not know how God wishes him to live, there is no a priori way of knowing whether God intends him to commit suicide or not.

Another reason why the narrator's religious arguments do not seem altogether convincing is that they are similar to those of David's mother, which Crabbe had already shown to be superficial. When David goes to his mother for advice and help, "She in her Zeal conjured him to repent, / Told him that Heaven alone deserv'd his Care" (lines 450-451). The word "Zeal" reveals that Crabbe felt this reply to be narrow and puritanical. Yet at the end of the poem the narrator advises David to do exactly the same thing -- overcome his pride and look to Heaven -- an answer which also

fails to meet David's needs.

The narrator's replies to David embody the same type of reasoning as was used by Job's comforters. Finding that David has failed, the narrator concludes that David must have offended God by committing the sin of pride. One has the feeling that this conclusion would be applied to everyone, even if pride were not evident. In "The Patron," of course, the answer of resignation is applicable because to some extent John was guilty of the sin of pride. Yet in the case of David, Crabbe has taken especial care to show David's ambition to be well founded. David is endowed with excellent qualities: ambition, a fine intellect, sensitivity to beauty and the will to work. Yet because of his birth he is unable to create a place for himself in society. The narrator has no positive solution to offer; all he can affirm is that a belief in God's wrath will frighten people into submission. This "solution" was widely believed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. William Paley had made fear of God one of the foundations of his system of morals. Yet in "David Morris" Crabbe shows clearly that fear of God is no longer a sufficient deterrent. It did not prevent David from committing suicide. Nor does fear of God any longer appear as a possible explanation why the poor should remain content with their position. The fate of David shows that unless changes were made to incorporate such people meaningfully, then religion could no longer be relied on to keep them content.

Because the narrator's religious arguments crumble before

David's critical humanist approach, one might wonder if perhaps Crabbe did not feel some of David's doubts. Everything that is known about Crabbe would suggest the opposite. His son commented: "[Religion] had had an increasing influence over his mind. The growth had been ripening with his age, and was especially perceptible in his later years."⁵⁸ Yet as F.M. Link has pointed out in the above mentioned article, "Three Crabbe Letters,"⁵⁹ Crabbe's son had originally intended to quote from one of these "new" letters to illustrate Crabbe's religious views, but apparently decided later against using the passages. That he did not use them may be utterly unimportant. But when, as has been noted, the passages in the letter show Crabbe to have been none too certain about points "more or less important" of the Christian religion, the decision against including the passages may indicate that Crabbe's son felt them too "liberal" to do his father's reputation any good.

One passage in particular in "David Morris" is intriguing for the light it offers on the type of issue "more or less important" about which Crabbe was in doubt. Discussing some of the various hobbies, Crabbe comments on those people who examine "Cliffs and Quarries to behold / Wrecks of old Worlds and Calculate how old" (lines 76-77). Also in Book XIII of Tales of the Hall, Crabbe mentions a mountain where one finds:

shapes of shells, and forms
Of creatures in old worlds, of nameless worms,
Whose generations lived and died ere man,
A worm of other class, to crawl began
(XIII. 13-16).

⁵⁸Life, Ch. x, pp. 316-317.

⁵⁹"Three Crabbe Letters," ELN, II (1965), 200.

These lines indicate that Crabbe recognized the story of creation as told in Genesis was inaccurate.⁶⁰ Crabbe believed that religion would profit if theologians would stop accepting everything in the Bible as divinely inspired. He said to his son: "I believe that we do not differ much in our Ideas of the Inspiration of the Scriptures, if plenary & intire Inspiration be meant and I think that the Defenders of Christianity & the Authority of the old and new Testaments would rather gain than loose, by relaxing somewhat from the high Ground which they take in debating on this Matter."⁶¹ These passages do not suggest that Crabbe had any doubts about his own faith, but they do suggest that he was liberal enough to dislike seeing religion used dogmatically.

In "David Morris" the narrator's religious arguments appear unsatisfactory, not because Crabbe's own religion was weak, but because he had created a story in which the answer of resignation was inapplicable. In poems such as "The Hall of Justice" and "The Patron," Crabbe managed to avoid resolving his social questions by dissolving them in the religious terminology of his conclusions. Such a technique could work effectively only when the central character was himself penitent. In poems such as "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" and "David Morris" the characters do not accept

⁶⁰G.L.L. de Buffon in his famous Epoques de la nature (1778) had shown geologically that the earth was much older than Biblical commentators had hitherto believed. In England the controversy between Biblical and geological evidence really begins with James Hutton's Theory of the Earth (1795) in which Hutton claimed that geological evidence suggested the earth might have no beginning and no end.

⁶¹"Three Crabbe Letters," ELN, II (1965), 205.

that they have sinned, and therefore the religious conclusions appear imposed. Of course Crabbe might easily have constructed a character who thought he was unjustly treated when actually he was a boastful, ineffective dreamer. In such a case we would agree that the man needed a lesson in humility. But in "David Morris" Crabbe has created a person with whose ambitions we can and do sympathize.

If my account of the poem is correct then it may well be the case that in writing "David Morris" Crabbe created a "run-away character" in a situation which revealed his own belief that the church's orthodox answer to ambition was no longer sufficient. Certainly the poem suggests that the church would gain by relaxing "from the high Ground" to recognize the existence of David's problems. While Crabbe does not argue against the basic premises of his own religion, the poem reveals how little the church offers people like David. The poem completed, Crabbe would have seen the church described in an unfavourable light and himself revealed to be of the devil's party. This might explain his decision to withhold authorization for publication.

Such a hypothesis is, of course, pure conjecture. But the theory -- that Crabbe in the heat of inspiration created characters and situations which generated conclusions he felt were unwise to sanction -- offers an explanation for a consistent trait in his poetry. As has been noted many times, Crabbe continually advances radical and unusual ideas through his character portraits, but almost always manages to dispel their impact before the end of



the poem. In some cases he fails to fuse artistically the radical and conservative elements; "The Learned Boy," "Edward Shore" and "The Insanity of Ambitious Love" are obvious examples. But in many more cases he succeeds -- as in The Village, "The Hall of Justice" and "The Patron." For myself, "David Morris" is another such success; the conclusion -- that the church has no answers -- does not disconcert me. But clearly Crabbe felt otherwise.

CHAPTER 7

"CRABBE, MY LORD, DO HARES AND PHEASANTS COST"

Critics have correctly asserted that in his later poems Crabbe cannot be considered properly a social critic. Howard Mills, for instance, has commented that "by 1812 'Crabbe the Social Critic' is a misleading approach."¹ In a sense this is correct; by the time he came to write Tales (1812) and Tales of the Hall (1819), Crabbe had become greatly interested in the possibilities of employing verse in the creation of detailed and intricate character studies. Let us Mr. Mills himself admits, much of Crabbe's later work is "socially redemptive." Moreover in at least two books of Tales of the Hall (Book V and Book XII) Crabbe assumes his role of social critic. "Hungry Love

¹Howard Mills (ed.), George Crabbe: Tales, 1812 and Other Selected Poems, p. xiv.

Poachers" (Book XII), one of the most interesting of all his poems, deals with the subject of the game laws. Crabbe's delight in portraying the popular activities which laid the law to rest, James and Robert, he shows opposing sides of life to each other, but he also takes care to present the law as it relates to the problems caused by the game laws of 1811. A number of English historians, including the Rev. Dr. and Rev. Mr. [?], have quoted from the poem [?] and [?] and applied it to [?]

CHAPTER 7

"ENOUGH, MY LORD, DO HARES AND PHEASANTS COST"

I

Critics have commonly asserted that in his later poems Crabbe cannot be considered primarily a social critic. Howard Mills, for instance, has commented that "by 1812 'Crabbe the Social Critic' is a misleading approach."¹ In a sense this is correct; by the time he came to write Tales (1812) and Tales of the Hall (1819), Crabbe had become greatly interested in the possibilities of employing verse in the creation of detailed and intricate character studies. Yet as Dr. Mills himself admits, much of Crabbe's later work is "socially representative." More over in at least two Books of Tales of the Hall (Book V and Book XXI) Crabbe resumes his role of social critic. "Smugglers

¹Howard Mills (ed.), George Crabbe: Tales, 1812 and Other Selected Poems, p. xix.

Poachers" (Book XXI), one of the most interesting of all his poems, deals with the subject of the game laws. Crabbe's delight in portraying the complex motives which lead the two brothers, James and Robert, to choose opposing ways of life is apparent, but he also takes care to present the brothers in relation to the problems caused by the game laws of 1819. A number of social historians, including the Hammonds and Chester Kirby, have quoted from the poem approvingly, and have employed it as quasi-evidence of the human problems caused by the game laws.²

"Smugglers and Poachers" has added interest as a social document, since Crabbe's son mentions that the story was first suggested to Crabbe by Samuel Romilly, the great criminal law reformer.³ Unlike many people of the privileged classes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Romilly refused to participate in the conscience-easing displays of public charity,

²J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer 1760-1832 (London, 1919), p. 194; Chester Kirby, "English Game Law Reform," in Essays in Modern English History in Honour of Wilbur Cortez Abbott (Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 367.

³In a footnote to "Smugglers and Poachers" Crabbe's son says, "The subject of "Smugglers and Poachers" was suggested to Mr. Crabbe by Sir Samuel Romilly, on the 10th of September, 1818," The Poetical Works of the Rev. George Crabbe (London, 1834), VII, 274. This particular piece of information must be treated with some reservation since there is no further corroboration. Romilly arrived at Cowes, in the Isle of Wight, on September 3rd, and stayed until the end of the month. If Crabbe's son is correct, then Romilly must have made his suggestion to Crabbe by letter. No such letter is extant. The letter of course may be lost, but since Crabbe's son was notoriously inaccurate with dates (he says Romilly died on October 30th, when actually he died on November 2nd), possibly Romilly suggested the story at an earlier date.

and entered the House of Commons with the specific intention of representing the interests of the mass of the people. Crabbe, who had first met Romilly in June 1818,⁴ seems to have been immediately attracted by Romilly's humanitarianism. Either at this meeting or shortly afterwards, Romilly suggested to Crabbe that he write a poem about the game laws. At this period Romilly was endeavouring to gather support for his campaign to reform the game laws by bringing their unjustness and inhumanity to the attention of the public. What had particularly angered Romilly was the piece of game law legislation that had slipped unnoticed through the House at the end of the session of 1816. Under the disguise of an amendment to the Rogue and Vagabond Act, a bill had been passed allowing magistrates summarily to punish night poachers with a seven-year transportation sentence for a first offence.

Romilly remarked:

The Act professed in the preamble to be made against persons who went armed by night, and committed acts of violence and murders; but, in its enacting part, it punished, with transportation for seven years, any person who should be found by night in any open ground, having in his possession any net or engine for the purpose of taking or destroying any hare, rabbit, or other game⁵

In the following year Romilly was able to have this Bill partially repealed, so as to allow the accused poacher at least the chance

⁴In his Memoirs, Romilly records for Tuesday, June 23rd: "A very pleasant dinner with Crabbe (whom I had never before seen)" Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly (London, 1840), III, 362.

⁵Sir Samuel Romilly, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, III, 275.

of a trial before jury. But the country gentlemen, while preaching charity and patience, would have their pound of flesh; the punishment of seven years' transportation remained.

Shortly after this legislation, and only a few months after his first meeting with Crabbe, Romilly committed suicide, apparently distraught at the sudden death of his wife. On hearing the news, Crabbe composed a poem in Romilly's memory -- appropriately enough, on a blank leaf of the manuscript of "Smugglers and Poachers." This poem, never meant for publication, gives some indication of the respect Crabbe felt for Sir Samuel and of his desire to write a poem ("Smugglers and Poachers") following his advice. The first and third stanzas are:

Thus had I written, so a friend advised,
Whom as the first of counsellors I prized,
The best of guides to my assuming pen,
The best of fathers, husbands, judges, men.
"This will he read," I said, "and I shall hear
Opinion wise, instructive, mild, sincere,
For I that mind respect, for I the man revere."

Yes! I was proud to speak of thee, as one
Who had approved the little I had done,
And taught me what I should do! -- Thou wouldst raise
My doubting spirit by a smile of praise,
And words of comfort! great was thy delight
Fear to expel, and ardour to excite,
To wrest th' oppressor's arm, and do the injured right.⁶

In writing "Smugglers and Poachers" at Romilly's request, Crabbe was guided by his principles; it was meant to be a contribution to justice -- "to wrest th' oppressor's arm, and do the injured right."

⁶The Poetical Works (1834), VII, 275.

When Romilly suggested in late 1818 that Crabbe write a poem on the game laws, he was not asking Crabbe to take up some unknown or ultra-radical cause. From about 1815 onwards, reform of the game laws had become a topic of "serious general attention."⁷ Crabbe could feel assured that he was addressing his poem to a large audience already acquainted with the major issues of game law reform. Whether his reader were a liberal townsman in favour of reform or a Tory squire, both would know that poaching had become a problem of national concern. He could also expect his readers to have some knowledge of the subject. In the previous five years more than a dozen pamphlets had been published on the subject of the game laws, most of them advocating reform. "No other subject caused so much litigation and brought so many cases into the courts in the eighteenth century as did the game laws."⁸ Although Crabbe was by no means the first person to take up the subject of the conflict between the poacher and the squire, he was one of the first poets to deal with the problem. With what relief does one turn from Sommerville's The Chace and Thomson's "Autumn," with their glorification of the fox hunt, to Crabbe's humane portrayal of the distress caused by the unjust game laws. If the anonymous pamphlet, Poetical Remarks on the Game Laws (1797), which is not very poetical, is excepted, I know of no other poem, earlier than Crabbe's, which deals in depth with the unsatisfactory

⁷Chester Kirby, "English Game Law Reform," p. 369.

⁸Chester Kirby, "The English Game Law System," in The American Historical Review, XXXVIII (New York, 1933), 250.

nature of the game laws. Sir Walter Scott's poem "The Poacher" (1811) of course deals with poaching, but Scott's poacher is a feckless, shifty and antisocial villain. Far from wishing to reform the game laws, Scott appears to think them satisfactory; according to Scott, not the game laws, but the poachers required reform. Scott's poem will be mentioned again later, for it is a professed imitation of Crabbe's early style, and will serve as an excellent comparison with "Smugglers and Poachers."

Why was there such a sudden outpouring of interest in the game laws after 1815, and what were the reasons that convinced Crabbe of the need for changes? This chapter is no place for a full scale discussion of the game laws; nor would such a discussion be possible, for the English game laws, unlike those of France, is a subject still largely unworked by historians. But a few significant facts can be mentioned which will perhaps allow a better understanding of Crabbe's poem.⁹

⁹The following works contain detailed commentary on the game laws: J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer 1760-1832, pp. 186-199; Chester Kirby, "English Game Law Reform," in Essays in Modern English History in honour of Wilbur Cortez Abbott (Harvard University Press, 1941), pp. 345-380; Chester Kirby, "The English Game Law System," American Historical Review, XXXVIII (1933), pp. 240-262; Charles Chenevix Trench, The Poacher and the Squire (London, 1967). The three Reports of the Select Committees (1816, 1823, 1828) contain invaluable evidence, although they must be used cautiously since in many cases the manner of questioning was designed to support the preconceived ideas of the committee members. Harriet Martineau's Forest and Game-Law Tales (London, 1845-1846) offers an excellent summary of the problems caused by the game laws. Although Miss Martineau's game law tales have little artistic merit they are among the best "literary" social documentaries to be found.

After about 1815 it became generally recognized that the game law legislation, which had worked efficiently a century before, was no longer effective. Although Sydney Smith might be considered a controversial Edinburgh Review Whig, few men would have disagreed with him when in 1819 he opened his essay on the game laws with the remark: "The evil of the Game Laws, in their present state, has long been felt, and of late years has certainly rather increased than diminished. We believe that they cannot long remain in their present state; and we are anxious to express our opinion of those changes which they ought to experience."¹⁰ After all, Sydney Smith was only echoing what Blackstone, that eminent conservative, had pointed out half a century earlier.¹¹ Even Sir William Elford, an aristocrat who believed that hunters should be allowed to pursue game over another man's property, agreed that the feudal game laws of the seventeenth century were no longer applicable to the new commercial Britain. In his pamphlet A Few Cursory Remarks on the Obnoxious Parts of the Game Laws, he exclaimed:

A certain part of the Game Laws of this kingdom have long been considered as a disgrace to its jurisprudence, and as, perhaps, the only glaring instance in which an equality of rights does not

¹⁰[Sydney Smith], review of Three Letters on the Game Laws, in The Edinburgh Review, XXXI (1818-1819), 295. Colonel Wood's Select Committee of 1816 had reported: "Your Committee conceive, that in the present state of society, there is little probability that the Laws above referred to [the game laws] can continue adequate to the object for which they were originally enacted." See p. 3.

¹¹Sir William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England, II (1765-1769), 411-419.

obtain among the various classes of the community. That in this part of our code, the greatest partiality in favour of the higher classes prevails, the slightest view of the subject will demonstrate; and all experience has shewn that the injustice of the system, is at least equalled by its inadequacy to the intended end.¹²

When even aristocrats recognized that the game laws gave their class unfair privileges, the times were ripe for change.

In their origin the game laws were closely associated with the barons' struggle to wrest power from the king. Just as the barons obtained special concessions in land, so they obtained privileges to hunt game. Game however is more difficult to define than property, and the question was never settled of how anyone could own as property feroe naturae, which by definition was wild and thus could not be contained within boundaries. For all intents and purposes the game laws in Crabbe's time were essentially those codified in 1671, when a system of "qualification" was established.¹³ Under this system no one actually owned the wild game, but certain people were given the privilege of hunting it. By this act the only persons allowed to hunt game (fox hunting was in a separate category) were those who had an income from land and tenements of more than one hundred pounds per year and those with leases of ninety-nine years or more, the income of which was at least one

¹²Sir William Elford, A Few Cursory Remarks on the Obnoxious Parts of the Game Laws, 2nd ed., in The Pamphleteer, X (London, 1817), 21. I can find no copy of the 1st edition. The advertisement to the 2nd edition states that the pamphlet was first published "between twenty and thirty years ago."

¹³This important act is the 22-23 Car. II. c. 25.

hundred and fifty pounds. Eldest sons of men who ranked as Esquires or higher were also qualified. A curious anomaly in the game laws was that while these eldest sons were qualified, their fathers were not.

This system of qualification, based solely on social privilege, worked fairly well for approximately a hundred years. So long as the country gentlemen remained the most important social force in the kingdom, and so long as the rest of society was geared to serve their interests, few social or moral reasons existed to cause farmers and workers to question the privileges bestowed by the game laws. The qualification system did not put an end to poachers, and these poachers made away with substantial amounts of game; but until the time of the Napoleonic wars the poachers was considered little more than a social nuisance, and if not beloved at least tolerated.

As early as the second half of the eighteenth century, however, when growing industrialization was beginning to change the face of the country, voices of dissatisfaction about the game laws began to be raised. The farmers had the most to be dissatisfied with, since they had to stand by helplessly while the game devoured their crops, perhaps waiting for one of the gentry, a "qualified person," to come and shoot at his leisure. Either that, or they could risk breaking the law and turn poacher by hunting or trapping the game themselves. As always, the farmers were poorly organized so that their complaints were not often heard. However towards the end of the eighteenth century,

William Marshall complained: "To a person who has not been eye-witness to the destruction which accompanies an inordinate quantity of game, the quantity of damage is in a manner inconceivable."¹⁴ In spite of heavy damage to their crops, tenant farmers were reluctant to clash with those in the realms of power. When the landed interest had so many claims upon the community, and as many ways of exerting pressure, criticism of the existing game laws became an attack on the vested interests of the landlord -- criticism, which at the manor and the House of Commons, was interpreted as an attack on the principle of subordination itself.

In spite of the attempts by the powerful landowners to heap ignominy on those small farmers who demanded that game be made the property of the owners of the soil, a bill was introduced in Parliament as early as 1772 to lower property qualifications almost to the vanishing point, but the bill had no chance of success.¹⁵ Then in 1796, Curwen introduced a bill to abolish all property qualifications.¹⁶ Although this bill received influential support from such liminaries as Charles James Fox and Wilberforce, Pitt managed to make it appear ridiculous enough for the House to throw it out as yet another ill-conceived attempt to

¹⁴William Marshall, The Rural Economy of Norfolk, 2nd ed. (London, 1795), I, 175. The first edition was published in 1787.

¹⁵Chester Kirby, "English Game Law Reform," p. 353.

¹⁶In voting for this bill, Richard Brinsley Sheridan commented that he was "an enemy to the existing game laws, because he was an enemy to injustice and oppression." See speech for April 29, 1796, in The Speeches of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan (London, 1842), III, 83.

level ranks.

Even if the House of Commons refused to recognize the signs, it was becoming apparent that the game laws were causing a great deal of unrest and dissatisfaction in the country. Had the Napoleonic wars not silenced all effective opposition for some twenty years, the game laws might well have erupted into a national issue sooner than they did. When peace was finally declared in 1815, and Wellington returned to England to shoot his pheasants, the problems caused by the game laws (along with many other domestic issues) were immediately brought to the public's attention. What men will endure in times of war when their attention is directed outward can soon appear intolerable once peace has been restored. Moreover by 1815 new methods of hunting game had been introduced, methods which increased the difficulties of enforcing the game laws. As a result of large scale enclosures, and the consequent necessity of preserving game, the country gentlemen had begun to create game preservation areas. A squire would set aside a particular wood or fallow for the express purpose of raising game. Often large sums of money would be spent on the care of pheasant eggs with the result that the owner found it necessary to hire a new staff to look after the young birds until they were old enough to let loose in the fields. Now instead of roaming over wide areas, pheasants and hares were concentrated in special preserves. This practice made shooting more certain, since the squire and his friends did not have to hunt over wide

expanses to find the game. Unfortunately for the squire, this concentration of game made the work of the poacher easier as well. In one night with his nets and snares, he might make off with several dozen pheasants.

A second reason for the practice of concentrating game in small areas was the introduction from the continent of the battue around the year 1800. In the battue the squire's servants would beat the fields and woods in order to drive the game towards the "hunters." To have a successful battue the lord of the manor had to ensure that certain areas on his estate were kept heavily stocked with game. Since the battue usually took place near the end of the season, for most of the year large numbers of game abounded within easy sight of the village labourers -- a temptation often impossible to resist. The more attention the squires lavished on their game, the easier the poacher's job became.

The most significant reason for the breakdown of the game laws actually had little to do with the squires or the poachers, but is to be found in the tastes of the new monied classes of the large towns and cities. The country people of quality, still the leaders of taste, had set the example of making game a compulsory dish for all fashionable suppers. Naturally enough the new monied classes of the city desired to follow this lead. For important occasions, large dinners, and even ordinary suppers in inns, game became a necessary dish. At Christmas and the Lord Mayor's supper game was on the menu, whether illegal or not. The Select Committee on the game laws (1823) noted in

their report:

That the laws which prohibit the sale of Game, are constantly and systematically evaded, or set at defiance That the markets, by these means, appear to be constantly and abundantly supplied That the demand, during the season, is constant; and that the practice of purchasing Game is not confined to any one class of the community, but is habitual to persons of every class who have not the means of being sufficiently supplied with that article from their own manors or land.¹⁷

As the new class of prosperous merchants and industrialists whose money came from sources other than the land increased, so the demand for game increased also.¹⁸ Evelina may have disliked to see the tradespeople apeing the habits of their betters, but if Lord Orville ate game for supper, then so would the Branghton family -- game which in both cases might come from Lord Orville's estate.

While it was all very well for a new section of the population to develop a taste for game, this taste had to be satisfied by a constant flow of game from the country to the cities. The squires were only too willing to play the part of the benevolent landlord by distributing presents of game to their friends, but such paternal generosity could not meet the large

¹⁷Report from the Select Committee on the Laws Relating to Game (1823), pp. 3-4.

¹⁸This increase in the amount of game eaten by the wealthy people of the city was only one instance of the way in which the middle and lower classes were adopting the eating habits of their superiors. The increase in the consumption of tea and sugar by the lower classes throughout the eighteenth century is perhaps the best known instance of this trend.

scale economic demand from the cities and towns. The obvious solution was for the people in the towns who wanted game to buy it. But the game laws made the sale of game illegal (although until 1818 it was legal for a qualified person to buy game!). No one, whether qualified or not, was allowed to sell game. But the forces of economics do not follow the wishes of a minority sector of the community; a large demand for a certain item calls into operation the suppliers. The innkeepers and gentlemen of the city were determined to have their game for supper, and as the only way they could buy it was through the poacher-coachman-poulterer ring, the demand for game in the cities created a large scale business in the transportation of game from the country. This thriving trade created a demand for poachers. The Select Committee of 1823 noted:

These [game] laws have entirely failed in preventing the purchase and sale of Game; and that although in some instances, persons legally in possession of Game, dispose of it by sale, yet that the great supply of the market is in the hands of the poachers, who are, by this nearly exclusive trade, encouraged in the greatest degree to the continuance of their depredations.¹⁹

As the number of poachers increased to meet the demand for game, so did the squires increase the number of armed game keepers. But the demand for game was constantly growing, the profits were good, and so the vicious circle continued until England found herself with two opposing armies -- the keepers and the poachers.

¹⁹Report from the Select Committee (1823), p. 4.

This metaphor of "two opposing armies" is by no means an exaggeration as one might at first think. The historian A.J. Peacock mentions that the "press of the time contains hundreds of accounts of pitched battles at night." He comments:

The poaching war did as much as anything else in the early nineteenth century to widen the gulf between the classes in rural England. On the one hand were the land-owners employing gamekeepers and organised in associations, which quite openly appealed -- with very little success -- for informers, and on the other the gangs.²⁰

Robert Haldane Bradshaw in his evidence to the Select Committee commented, "I can command a little army, who assist my keepers, and go out at nights."²¹

A reason sometimes given for the increase in poaching after 1800 is that the low standard of life amongst the labourers forced them to poach in order to eat. The Hammonds, for instance, argue that the bad economic conditions were the principle reason for turning honest labourers into poachers.²² Certainly this argument carries some force, for in hard times the squire's large preserves of game must have been an almost unbearable temptation to the unemployed labourer with three or four children and a wife to feed. Yet the scale on which poaching took place, and the organization which developed to transport the game from the country to the city,

²⁰ A.J. Peacock, Bread or Blood (London, 1965), p. 38.

²¹ Report from the Select Committee (1828), p.78.

²² The Village Labourer, p. 186.

seems to require a more sophisticated explanation than that of the misery of individuals. The poachers rarely ate the pheasants and partridges they captured (although they ate the rabbits and hares), since meat at this time was not common in their diet. The game was captured to be sold.²³ Although the individual poacher netting a few pheasants to fill out his meagre income undoubtedly contributed to the upsurge of poaching, the main cause appears to have been the large-scale rings of poachers prepared to ship a weekly quota to the main centres such as London, Bristol and Manchester. In his Rural Rides, Cobbett speaks of the "silver gun" of the rich merchant, a weapon more certain of bringing him game than any he could buy at a gun shop: "Shooting with a silver gun is a saying amongst game-eaters. That is to say, purchasing the game. A waddling, fat fellow that does not know how to prime and load, will, in this way, beat the best shot in the country."²⁴

When the squires found that the trade in game was being openly conducted by poulterers and hawkers in the towns and cities, and that the tables of their city friends were being supplied surreptitiously from their own estates, they naturally attempted to stop this trade. From their point of view, the most practical measure was to prevent the poachers from taking the game. To catch the poacher, the squires employed more gamekeepers. Although the number of poachers apprehended and convicted rose dramatically

²³Report from the Select Committee (1823), p. 32.

²⁴William Cobbett, Rural Rides, Everyman ed. (London, 1966), I, 174.

in the years after 1790, poaching still continued to increase. The next reaction of the squires was to increase the punishment. In 1800 a law was passed making gang poaching punishable by two years' imprisonment and a whipping.²⁵ Two years later the punishment for deer stealing was increased to seven years' transportation.²⁶ In 1803 Parliament once again obliged the country gentlemen by passing Lord Ellenborough's Act, making it possible to sentence to death anyone resisting arrest. But the harshness of these laws had little or no effect in reducing the number of poaching offences. If anything, they made the poachers more violent than ever, so that blood was spilt on both sides.

When the Napoleonic wars ended, and the silence which had reigned over domestic issues for some twenty years was finally broken, men were horrified when they looked about them at the blood and misery caused by the game law situation. The immediate consequence was the formation in 1816 of Colonel Wood's Select Committee to take into consideration the laws relating to game. But even as this committee was meeting, a new law was passed in Parliament making it possible for a magistrate to sentence a poacher summarily on his first offence to seven years' transportation.

²⁵39-40 Geo. III. c. 50. In Crabbe's county, Wiltshire, in the period from May 17, 1816 to June 1817, sixty-nine people were confined in houses of correction for offences against the game laws. See Returns . . . of the Number of Persons . . . in Confinement in the different Gaols in England and Wales, for Offences against the Game Laws (1817), p. 13.

²⁶42 Geo. III. c. 107. Trench notes, "In the first sixty years of the eighteenth century there were only six acts directed against ordinary poaching of small game; in the next fifty-six years there were thirty-three such acts, most of them tightening up the law and increasing the penalties." The Poacher and the Squire, p. 124.

The severity of this new law at a time when liberal thinkers were expecting some positive reforms was what finally induced Romilly to take up game law reform.²⁷ Although Romilly succeeded in introducing a minor amendment in the following year, and influenced people such as Crabbe to advocate less severe game laws, game law reform was not instituted until 1831.

An apology is perhaps in order for this lengthy summary of the problems arising out of the game laws, but when the subject is so complicated, some knowledge of detail is necessary to catch the finer points of Crabbe's presentation and to understand his intentions in writing "Smugglers and Poachers." One can see that "Smugglers and Poachers," published in 1819, appeared at a time when the movement for game law reform was at its first peak. In the light of what is known about the attitudes of people to the game laws in 1819, and with the knowledge that Romilly had asked Crabbe to write a poem revealing the inhumanity of the game laws, Crabbe's poem can now be examined to determine how Crabbe treated the subject of the game laws.

²⁷Romilly ironically remarked that the game laws became stricter "just in the proportion that the value of money has diminished." See Observations on the Criminal Law of England (London, 1810), p. 60.

II

One of the most interesting features of "Smugglers and Poachers," from both the artistic and sociological point of view, is Crabbe's characterization of the poacher Robert. In any work of art dealing with the game laws, the presentation of the poacher is all-important. If he is sympathetically portrayed, then inevitably the game laws are made to appear unjust; but if the artist chooses to present the poacher as a species of vermin, encroaching on the property of honest and benevolent gentlemen, then punishments of sizeable fines, transportations, and even death, may not seem out of place. Crabbe's presentation of Robert is largely sympathetic; Robert's expansive and generous nature is not dissimilar to that of Fielding's Tom Jones. Crabbe however by no means suggests that Robert is wholly the victim of an unjust legal system. Nor would one expect such a portrayal after what has been seen of Crabbe's presentation of social problems in earlier poems. In "Smugglers and Poachers" Crabbe attempts to describe the social side of the problems involved in the game laws. He is not interested so much in attaching blame to individuals or governments as he is in displaying how an entire community can be undermined when it continues to pay lip service to rigid moral and legal systems, the values of which no longer effectively serve as motives.

In the public mind, the poacher's station in society was usually regarded as one of the lowest. For Crabbe to have made

his poacher a wealthy farmer's son or a dishonest gamekeeper would have destroyed the reasons for the bond of sympathy between the reader and the poacher,²⁸ and thus he carefully stresses that Robert is a pauper-ward of the parish. Paupers such as Robert and his brother James could expect little more from the parish than the means of subsistence. If no work were available for these wards, often the case in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then they were set to repair the roads at about three shillings and sixpence per week.²⁹ When the poacher could sell a pheasant from the local manor for a shilling or more, it was no wonder that many of England's rural poor turned to poaching to supplement their meagre incomes. As parish ward, Robert has the type of background which usually bred poachers. Robert and his brother James are orphans, the sons of some wandering woman who left them to the parish care.³⁰ But the boys are also strong and handsome with a touch of mystery about them. In any of the novels of this time, the reader would have expected to discover that they were the natural sons of a nobleman.

²⁸The Reports from the Select Committees on the Game Laws showed that the poachers were often gamekeepers and wealthy farmers. Some poulterers in Leadenhall market were supplied regularly with game by the owners of estates.

²⁹See the account of conditions of the labouring poor in The Times, December 18, 1830.

³⁰It is interesting to note that throughout the eighteenth century, poets, novelists, and playwrights normally chose the orphan or widow as their subject when wishing to portray the "worthy poor."

While Crabbe carefully describes the poor background of his poacher, and gives Robert a penurious position in society, he does not appear to wish to defend the extreme thesis that a poor background is the ultimate cause of Robert's poaching. To ensure that the reader does not mistakenly draw this conclusion, Crabbe employs a stock eighteenth century device -- that of two brothers with antithetical personalities -- and gives Robert a foil in James. If Robert brings to mind Tom Jones, then James clearly bears similarities to Blifil. Cautious and somewhat narrow, James, like Blifil, inspires respect and not love in the villagers.³¹ Yet the distinction between the two brothers is not so clear cut as in Tom Jones or in Thomas Day's Sandford and Merton (1783-1789). The brother's personalities tend to merge in the beginning; only as the brothers grow older do they take different paths. In their separate ways, each brother has excellent potential, but potential which is never realized since the social pressures of the game laws develop their weaknesses rather than their strengths.³²

Robert and James begin with the same opportunities, or rather lack of them; yet when Robert turns to commerce and then smuggling, James takes up a respectable and secure position of service at Nether Hall. Beginning as a servant, James soon rises to the important position of head gamekeeper. James's success

³¹For another interesting example of Crabbe's use of this subject of the two contrasting brothers, see The Borough (Letter VIII). Walter is an astute businessman who works hard all his life, and then finds that he has no friends. His brother William, who fails at business because he is too soft-hearted, has to ask help from Walter. However Crabbe shows that in spite of his failure, William has succeeded in finding happiness.

indicates that Robert was not forced by his circumstances to use illegal means to secure a living. An interesting point to note is that nothing in the early character of James suggests he will be dishonest or evil. Only in comparison to his brother Robert, and Robert is the epitome of the open-hearted man, does James seem to lack any of the virtues. Taken by himself James at first appears to be an excellent man of the community who earns an important post at the manor by means of his own efforts. Yet compared with his brother Robert, and Crabbe proffers the comparison as often as possible, James does seem slightly narrow.

For instance, when he first goes to Nether Hall James is employed as an assistant to the gamekeeper, possibly one of many; while the law said that only one head gamekeeper could be licensed to shoot game, it said nothing about the number of his assistants.³² When the post of chief gamekeeper falls open, James is appointed. On the surface everything about this move seems legal and fair, but does Crabbe not hint that James treated his chief unfairly? The following four line description contains a subtle suggestion that James may have had a hand in removing the gamekeeper from his position:

He with the keeper took his daily round,
A rival grew, and some unkindness found;
But his superior farm'd! the place was void,
And James guns, dogs, and dignity enjoy'd
(lines 60-63).

³²Richard Burn, "Game," in The Justice of the Peace (1820), II, 530.

The crux here is the half line "But his superior farm'd." It was in the squire's interest to have a gamekeeper who was absolutely loyal. If the squire allowed one of his tenants to be keeper, then this tenant farmer might try to destroy the game or to frighten it away. The anonymous country gentleman, author of Thoughts on the Expediency of Legalizing the Sale of Game, pointed out that the farmer's interests were opposed to those of the squire and his gamekeeper: "It is now decidedly the interest of every farmer, to destroy the breed of game on his land, as it eats up his corn and invites trespassers upon his farm, and he has no compensation for these annoyances; he is frequently, therefore, in league with the poacher."³³ Moreover in strictly legal terms the gamekeeper could not be a farmer, since he had to be a servant of the owner of the land.³⁴ Thus the lord of the manor would have been breaking the law had he kept a gamekeeper who was also a farmer.

Crabbe points out that at the time James began to rival the keeper, and the keeper became unkind to him, the squire suddenly became aware that his keeper was farming. Who informed the squire? Crabbe never says directly that James had any part in the affair, but the juxtaposition of the keeper's unkindness to James with his dismissal leaves the impression that James is

³³Thoughts on the Expediency of Legalizing the Sale of Game (London, 1823), p. 20. The author of this pamphlet is the same man who wrote Three Letters on the Game Laws. He was probably a country gentleman of Norfolk.

³⁴Richard Burn, "Game," in The Justice of the Peace, II, 531-532. However this provision was repealed by the 48 Geo. III. c. 93.

not faultless. No doubt even if James did inform against the keeper, he has done nothing legally wrong, and perhaps nothing morally wrong, since to employ a gamekeeper-farmer was illegal. But when James's behaviour is compared to that of another open-hearted young man -- Tom Jones, and his treatment of Black George -- James's narrowness becomes evident. The passage is important as the first indication that James's success is not due to his hard work alone, but to deceit. Robert, one feels, would never have stooped to such deceit; consequently he might not have risen by "honest means."³⁵

Robert's virtues and vices are of the same order as those of any eighteenth century gentleman; indeed, except for his mean birth, Robert very much resembles a gentleman. Robert is pictured as a type of British empire builder; only he wrests his living, not from the spices of the East, but from the game preserves of the squire. Had Robert been the son of a man of means, his ambition would have been accepted as a matter of course. People expected the son of a gentleman to strive for independence. As was shown in the previous chapter, a man who was not independent was ipso facto not a gentleman. One should recall that in the eighteenth century ambition was not in itself thought of as evil. Edmund Burke, by no means a Radical, had said: "God has planted in man a sense of ambition, and a satisfaction arising from the contemplation of his excelling his fellows in something deemed valuable

³⁵That Crabbe recognized the poor were not always able to improve their standard of living by "honest means" has been seen already in "David Morris," lines 537-542.

amongst them."³⁶ Ambition became suspect only when introduced into a social or political context: socially, it was dangerous to the vested interests of the governing class; and politically, it threatened the stability of the class system and the constitution. Inevitably the sight of an ordinary parish ward, fired with ambition to better his life, caused many amongst the gentry to take alarm that such attempts would upset the established order.³⁷ Had Robert been born amongst the gentry or even the merchant class, he would have been given an opportunity to utilize his driving energy, but as a poor man, the only alternatives were to serve in the forces abroad or to begin a life of crime. Significantly enough, Robert does not choose the usual resort of the distressed gentleman, the highway, but the venial crimes of smuggling and poaching. Moreover Crabbe never condemns Robert's decision, but shows it to be the result of his generous nature coupled with his ambition to be free. The suggestion is that in the context of England's social conditions, Robert's actions are natural enough.

In creating such a poacher, Crabbe was obviously breaking with the Tory tradition of presenting the poacher as a low order of humanity. The squires had a vested interest in caricaturing

³⁶ Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, ed. J.T. Boulton (London, 1958), p. 50 (Part I, Sec. xvii). The Enquiry is an early work however; Burke's later statements on ambition are not so genial.

³⁷ See Francis Place's comment that his customers left him if they found he read books. Graham Wallas, The Life of Francis Place, rev. ed. (London, 1918), pp. 37-38.
 particularly important form in the Rev. Gosh. Richardson's Religious
laughter (1809), with a reputed circulation of two million copies.

poachers as mean, rascally fellows, far beyond hope of redemption. For instance, in Hannah More's Black Giles the Poacher, one of the Cheap Repository Tracts (1795-1798), Giles is presented as a person who will stoop to anything -- even to robbing the Widow Brown of her apples! Mary Leadbeater in Cottage Dialogues Among the Irish Peasantry (1811) and the Rev. Legh Richmond in his three famous tales of village life (1809-1814) had presented the rural workers as limited persons with little or no ambition and no spirit.³⁸ While commending the lower classes for industry, sobriety, frugality, they reserved the highest praise for those who refused aid from the poor relief. Cowper, who felt that in most cases poverty was "self-inflicted woe; / Th' effect of laziness or sottish waste," described the poacher as the dregs of humanity:

'Tis quenchless thirst
Of ruinous ebriety that prompts
His ev'ry action, and imbrutes the man
(The Task IV. 459-461)

and called for "a law to noose the villain's neck." Unlike these authors who believed that obedience was the sum of all lower class virtues, Crabbe realized that no man -- whether of the upper or lower class -- was evil because he wished to live "by his wits" (in Hannah More's Black Giles the Poacher such a philosophy is bitterly condemned).

In part, the gentry probably believed many of their own stories about the perfidy of the poacher, but much of this distortion

³⁸This paternalistic attitude to the poor is found in a particularly repugnant form in the Rev. Legh Richmond's Dairyman's Daughter (1809), with a reputed circulation of two million copies.

of the character of the poacher was a justification for the severe penalties and spring guns. The commonly held belief that the poacher was a lesser being was as often as not an exaggeration. One has only to read the evidence given before the Select Committees to realize that Crabbe's presentation of Robert, with the emphasis on Robert's fine qualities of boldness and courage, typifies many of the poachers of this time. Potter Macqueen's description of the poachers in the Bedford gaol shows that many were young men of good reputation:

In January, 1829, there were 96 prisoners for trial in Bedford gaol, of whom 76 were able-bodied men, in the prime of life, and, chiefly, of general good character, who were driven to crime by sheer want, and who would have been valuable subjects had they been placed in a situation where, by the exercise of their health and strength, they could have earned a subsistence. There were in this number 18 poachers awaiting trial for the capital offence of using arms in self-defence when attacked by game-keepers; Of these 18 men, one only was not a parish pauper, and he was the agent of the London poulterers, who, passing under the apparent vocation of a rat-catcher, paid these poor creatures more in one night than they could obtain from the overseer for a week's labour.³⁹

Macqueen makes two interesting points here: first, that many of the poachers were decent young men; and second, that they were driven to poaching because of the bad economic conditions.

Although Crabbe clearly wishes to describe Robert in the best light possible, he plays down Macqueen's second point that poverty leads to poaching.

³⁹Potter Macqueen, Thoughts and Suggestions on the present Condition of the Country. Quoted from The Times, December 18, 1830.

Often the idle, dispirited village labourer, whom the squires averred were poacher potential, did not have the imagination or ambition to match wits with the gamekeeper. As a result the injustices and hardships of pre-Reform England fell heaviest on the ambitious, men such as Robert. Often such men chose openly to rebel against society rather than become tied to a lifetime grind of labour which offered sixpence a day as reward. James Hawker describes this attitude admirably:

In this year 1850 -- when I was 14 years of age -- I first commenced to Poach. My Father Had Tried to Better our Position Lawfully and had failed. So I was determined to try some other means. I was surrounded by every Temptation. The Class that starved me certainly tempted me with all their Game and Fish.⁴⁰

Hawker cites several instances of how he took labourers poaching who were too timid to poach on their own, but who obviously needed the extra supplies for their families.

The poacher generally has been a slightly romanticized figure in literature, so that one cannot help sympathizing with his woodlore and independent spirit. When Wordsworth, in a well known passage, tells how he went night poaching as a boy, the reader obviously takes great delight in these adventures:

Ere I had told
Ten birth-days, when among the mountain slopes
Frost, and the breath of wind, had snapped
The last autumnal crocus, 'twas my joy
With store of springes o'er my shoulder hung
To range the open heights where woodcocks run

⁴⁰James Hawker's Journal: A Victorian Poacher, ed. Garth Christian, p. 3.
Bellinacour (Oxford Press: Oxford, 1946), p. 16.

Along the smooth green turf. Through half the night,
 Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied
 That anxious visitation⁴¹

No one asks if Wordsworth were qualified or not. Although Robert was more than "ten birth-days," and what is excusable in a young boy is often punishable in a man, much of the sympathy one feels for the young Wordsworth is due Robert as well.

Scholars have often felt that the Crabbe of Tales and Tales of the Hall turned away from the liberalism of his youth, but his sympathetic presentation of Robert gives reason for altering this view. On the other hand, Crabbe by no means sides wholly with Robert; he appreciates that the two brothers represent opposing but valid philosophies of life. James is an honest but dull man who lacks imagination:

James talk'd of honest gains and scorn of debt,
 Of virtuous labour, of a sober life,
 And what with credit would support a wife
 (lines 75-77).

Robert replies to these domestic values with all the fire and energy of a William Blake advocating reform:

But Robert answer'd -- "How can men advise
 Who to a master let their tongue and eyes?
 Whose words are not their own? whose foot and hand
 Run at a nod, or act upon command?
 Who cannot eat or drink, discourse or play,
 Without requesting others that they may.
 Debt you would shun; but what advice to give,
 Who owe your service every hour you live!
 Let a bell sound, and from your friends you run,
 Although the darling of your heart were one;
 But, if the bondage fits you, I resign
 You to your lot -- I am content with mine!"
 (lines 78-89).

⁴¹The Prelude I. 306-314, 1850 version, ed. E. de Selincourt (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1926), p. 19.

Robert's refusal to accept his brother's rather passive approach to life carries overtones which should not be ignored. James's way of life is that which moralists of the time advocated for the labouring poor. For example, James's philosophy can be seen represented in the series of verses William Lisle Bowles wrote for the children of the poor in his parish. The poem "The Old Labourer" serves well to illustrate the type of life Bowles wanted the labourers to lead:

Are you not tired, you poor old man!
The drops are on your brow;
Your labour with the sun began,
And you are labouring now!

I murmur not to dig the soil,
For I have heard it read,
That man by industry and toil
Must eat his daily bread.

The lark awakes me with his song,
That hails the morning gray,
And when I mourn for human wrong,
I think of God, and pray.

Let worldlings waste their time and health,
And try each vain delight;
They cannot buy, with all their wealth,
The labourer's rest at night.⁴²

This poem indicates that Bowles would have highly praised James's prudent philosophy. Indeed, at first sight James's philosophy -- that he must work hard, save his money, and eventually marry a good wife who will help with the household accounts -- may seem

⁴² William Lisle Bowles, The Villager's Verse-Book (1837), in The Poetical Works of William Lisle Bowles, ed. George Gilfillan (Edinburgh, 1855), II, 252-253. Bowles notes that although the poems were not published until 1837, they were written much earlier.

reasonable and practical. Yet a double standard has crept in imperceptibly. For Bowles would have despised anyone from the upper classes who attempted to lead such a dull and servile existence. Robert, who has many upper class values, sees through the hypocrisy of this double standard and realizes that the type of life James advocates is one in which the only possible virtue is "virtuous labour." The danger for such people as James is that they will become like the mother of David Morris who, when she lost her follies "lost her feelings, too" (line 252).

Had all labourers been content with James's philosophy, and been willing to work virtuously for the rest of their lives, then no doubt the squires would have found it unnecessary to spend so much money on gamekeepers' salaries. The country in general would have experienced little or no discontent; the labourers would have been too busy saving to buy a wife to idle their time away at the ale house or in setting snares in the hedges. But peace and order are not the only worthwhile goals. The squire and his assistants valued them because they made their privileges easier to maintain. Yet as the Christian church discovered, the preaching of humility and abstinence is only possible when the people have no alternative to a life of abstinence. Many people, and Robert is one, demanded more from life than the charity of the rich; they wanted the opportunity to pursue wealth and happiness on their own terms. Francis Place mentioned that during his early years as a tailor, his most important guiding principle was "to get

money, and yet to avoid entertaining a mercenary, money-getting spirit; to get money as a means to an end, and not for its own sake."⁴³ For Place, money was power, a means of rising above his menial job of tailor. Like Francis Place, Robert realized that he could not achieve the independence he desired if he thought of nothing else but James's "virtuous work." As Charles James Fox said in connection with poor law reform: "It was not fitting in a free country that the great body of the people should depend on the charity of the rich."⁴⁴ It will be recalled that in "The Patron" Crabbe had shown the difficulty John would have in being his own man if he attempted to rise by means of Lord Frederick's patronage. In "Smugglers and Poachers" Crabbe has created in Robert a person who has decided that the servitude of patronage is debasing. Robert refuses to "run at a nod," and consequently chooses the life of smuggler and poacher in order to enjoy the independence he so much relishes.

Although Robert undoubtedly breaks the law when he turns to smuggling and poaching, Crabbe knew that his readers would recognize that Robert's situation as either smuggler or poacher was different from that of a highwayman such as Macheath. That poaching was not as serious a crime as highway robbery is one of the reasons that allows Crabbe to gain so much sympathy for Robert.

⁴³Quoted from Graham Wallas, The Life of Francis Place 1771-1854, p. 36. Place is discussing his early life, the years between 1800 and 1807.

⁴⁴Quoted from J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer, p. 210.

The game law reformers had good reasons for wishing to see the laws reformed. Sir Samuel Romilly and Sydney Smith were not sentimentalists who wanted to see all punishment abolished; they realized that the problems arising from game needed special measures, and that the country gentlemen could not expect to eliminate poaching by steadily increasing the severity of the punishment. As a man who had lived all his life in the country, Crabbe was aware of the special problems of game.

Robert however is not only a poacher, but a smuggler as well. As the title of the poem indicates, Crabbe deals with both crimes -- smuggling and poaching. Whereas in the first half of the poem both smuggling and poaching are mentioned, in the second half Crabbe shifts the focus to concentrate wholly on poaching. That the poem is principally about the poacher becomes clear in the second half when the topic of smuggling disappears. Why then does Crabbe introduce the subject of smuggling at all? If he wished to write a poem about the game laws, would it not have been better to avoid complications by concentrating on the one subject? Possibly so, but the introduction of the topic of smuggling does serve an artistic purpose. By minimizing Robert's poaching in the first half of the poem, Crabbe is able to set up the circumstances whereby a conflict between the two brothers is seen to develop over a length of time, allowing space for the two brothers to grow into mortal enemies. By the time James actually swears to apprehend his brother for poaching, Crabbe has set the scene and portrayed

the different personalities of Robert, James and Rachel.

In describing Robert as both a smuggler and a poacher, Crabbe also complies with the norm of his time. The two crimes were seen to be complementary; it was generally believed that a man who was a smuggler would also be a poacher, if circumstance permitted. The normal course of events was that men began by poaching, turned to smuggling, and then often went on to greater crimes.⁴⁵ Crabbe has reversed the order of events, since Robert begins as a smuggler and then turns to poaching. But this order is quite in accord with Robert's character. He is a smuggler-poacher, not from lack of ability to perform another job, but because he likes the adventure and profits earned from evading the law. Robert is not a shilling poacher in need of a loaf of bread; poaching for him is a business venture on a large scale.

Many people were prepared to argue that the laws against smuggling and poaching were of a peculiarly civil quality and did not contain any of the divine sanction of laws against stealing and murder. When Lord Viscount Cranborne asked John Stafford, chief clerk of Bow-Street, whether the "salesmen and poulterers who carry on this trade in the metropolis [were] generally men of respectable character, or men that would receive any stolen goods," Mr. Stafford replied:

No, I do not think they would receive any stolen goods; it is looked upon as a matter of trade; they look upon it as a great many

⁴⁵ See Report from the Select Committee (1823), pp. 30, 38.

persons do smuggling, that there is no harm in it; if they can do it without being detected, they do not think they do any moral wrong.⁴⁶

This point was also made very cogently by the author of Three Letters on the Game Laws:

It may perhaps be said that municipal law in general is but the prohibition of actions or privileges, to which men individually have by nature an equitable claim, but which the good of society and the interests of the government under which they live, render it necessary to restrain within certain limits. For example, this may particularly be asserted of all revenue laws; the object of which is to levy a duty, or, in other words, add an additional sum to the price of various articles to which the consumer has a natural and fair right upon payment only of the reasonable cost and profit to the manufacturer. The revenue laws may therefore be said to prohibit a man from the enjoyment of that to which he feels that he has an equitable claim, unless he will further contribute a sum, which has no connexion with the fair price of the article. They do therefore certainly place a temptation in his way to evade the payment of this additional sum, a temptation arising out of the very law itself, which punishes those who offend. I may be told then; -- If your argument on the Game Laws be good for any thing, it applies equally to the revenue laws, and in fact to all laws curtailing the natural rights of mankind, and confining them within the limits prescribed by the good of society, or the general necessities and convenience of the commonwealth.⁴⁷

But the author, while recognizing that the crimes of smuggling and poaching were of the same order, distinguished between the laws

⁴⁶Report from the Select Committee (1823), p. 39.

⁴⁷Three Letters on the Game Laws by a Country Gentleman, in The Pamphleteer, XI (London, 1818), 334-335. Letter I was first published in 1815; Letter II in 1817. These two letters were then collected and a third added in 1818 when they were published in The Pamphleteer.

against smuggling, which were for the public good, and the laws against poaching, which were out-dated and no longer of benefit to the community.

In coupling smuggling and poaching therefore, Crabbe was clearly working within a tradition firmly accepted at this time. However it is curious that Crabbe should have portrayed Robert as both a smuggler and a poacher when the poem was supposed to reveal the evils of the game laws. Although the laws against poaching required reform, those against smuggling seemed fairly reasonable. By portraying Robert as both poacher and smuggler Crabbe would seem to weaken his case against the game laws. This question brings out an important aspect of Crabbe's social criticism; Crabbe was never interested in constructing stories solely to demonstrate social abuses. Robert is not an idealized figure of social repression, but an active participant in a social drama of which the motives of the entire community have become distorted. Crabbe's interest lies primarily in showing what happens to Robert as the result of the game laws, rather than in using Robert to point out the evils of the game laws.

One of the most telling arguments ranged against the game laws at this time, and one which Crabbe introduces, was that wild animals were not property in any strict sense. If this assertion were accepted, then it followed that a poacher was not really stealing when he snared a few woodcocks. When questioned by Lord Wharncliffe if he did not think that he committed an offence when he sold game, Mr. R.S., a small shopkeeper, replied, "God made

Game, and I considered it every man's right." When pressed further, he replied that "in regard of God" he did not commit any crime, although "in regard of man" he did.⁴⁸ The Select Committee of 1823 had found the sale of game to be so widespread and open throughout the kingdom that it concluded: "A breach of these particular laws appears not to be considered as any moral offence whatever."⁴⁹ In spite of mounting evidence that the majority of the population no longer believed the game laws to be valid, many reactionaries still maintained that game was as much property as the valuables in a house, and argued that poachers should be shown no mercy. In a long treatise on the game laws published in 1817, Edward Christian defended the squire's right to his game, calling to his defence all the powers of religion, nature and law: "Every magistrate knows, that it is the common defence of a poacher, that it is very hard that he should be punished for taking what he had as good a right to as any other man. Religion, morality, and law, all equally deny it: and the teachers of these ought carefully to instruct the world of the falsehood and the mischievous consequences of the doctrine."⁵⁰ Sydney Smith pointed out the fallacy of Christian's reactionary position when he showed that if the people believed game not to be property then laws that failed to take this common belief into account would be impossible to enforce:

⁴⁸Report from the Select Committee (1828), p. 91.

⁴⁹Report from the Select Committee (1823), p. 4.

⁵⁰Edward Christian, A Treatise on the Game Laws (London, 1817), p. 293.

It is impossible to make an uneducated man understand in what manner a bird, hatched nobody knows where, -- to-day living in my field, to-morrow in your's, -- should be as strictly property as the goose whose whole history can be traced, in the most authentic and satisfactory manner, from the egg to the spit. The arguments upon which this depends are so contrary to the notions of the poor, -- so repugnant to their passions, -- and, perhaps, so much above their comprehension, that they are totally unavailing. The same man who would respect an orchard, a garden, or an hen-roost, scarcely thinks he is committing any fault at all in invading the game-covers of his richer neighbour; and as soon as he becomes wearied of honest industry, his first resource is in plundering the rich magazine of hares, pheasants, and partridges -- the top and bottom dishes, which on every side of his village are running and flying before his eyes.⁵¹

Crabbe introduces this argument through Rachel, the simple but virtuous village maiden:

Of guilt she thought not -- she had often heard
They bought and sold, and nothing wrong appear'd;
Her father's maxim this; she understood
There was some ill -- but he, she knew, was good;
It was a traffic -- but was done by night --
If wrong, how trade? why secrecy, if right?
But Robert's conscience, she believed, was pure --
And that he read his Bible she was sure
(lines 176-183).

Crabbe pokes a good deal of fun at Rachel's simple test of the truth, that Robert read his Bible, but on the other hand Rachel's attitude is symptomatic of that of a great many villagers. To the village community, the law was something alien and strange; they lived, not so much by what lawyers and judges decreed, as by what

⁵¹The Edinburgh Review, XXXI (1818-1819), 297.

"Hardly have the two sides been more sharply distinguished from each other than in the second half of the 18th century." The History of the English Working Class, p. 57-59.

had become common custom over the centuries.⁵² It was difficult to persuade the villager who had been brought up in the belief that poaching and smuggling were trades men winked at, but did not absolutely condemn, to accept the new type of justice that the squires were implementing to save their game preserves.

As the servant of the squire, James refuses to accept the poacher's argument that game belongs to all men:

James, better taught, in confidence declared
His grief for what his guilty brother dared:
He sigh'd to think how near he was akin
To one seduced by godless men to sin;
Who, being always of the law in dread,
To other crimes were by the danger led,
And crimes with like excuse -- The smuggler cries,
"What guilt is his who pays for what he buys?"
The poacher questions, with perverted mind,
"Were not the gifts of heaven for all design'd?"
This cries, "I sin not -- take not till I pay;" --
That, "My own hand brought down my proper prey." --
And while to such fond arguments they cling,
How fear they God? how honour they the king?
Such men associate, and each other aid,
Till all are guilty, rash, and desperate made;
Till to some lawless deed the wretches fly,
And in the act, or for the acting, die
(lines 184-201).

Crabbe, it should be noted, does not himself introduce these arguments from natural law; nor does he permit Robert to proclaim them. Rather he gives them to James. Crabbe has introduced the

⁵² Such generalizations positively invite debate. Nor is their verification by any means simple, since the supporting evidence -- statements by working class men and women -- has not nor could be expected to survive. However E.P. Thompson has shown that to some extent "there have always persisted popular attitudes towards crime, amounting at times to an unwritten code, quite distinct from the laws of the land." He concludes: "Rarely have the two codes been more sharply distinguished from each other than in the second half of the 18th century." The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 59-60.

argument in such a way that one can either believe or disbelieve it to the extent that one sympathizes with James. James of course is "better taught," so that one might think Crabbe sided entirely with James. But surely James is better taught because he has acquired the squire's principles. Edward Christian had claimed that morality, religion and law all stated game was property, but the common man did not believe this, and time has proved him to be correct. Blackstone, at that time the greatest authority on law, had maintained that "the sole right of taking and destroying game belongs exclusively to the king."⁵³ It would seem that the poor man's argument that game was not property also had some validity in a legal sense. To make matters even more difficult, Roman law, to which English law so often looked for example, stated that wild animals belonged to the person who could catch them, even upon another's land. James may have believed that the smugglers and poachers were entirely in the wrong, but as the Select Committees on game discovered, this represented a minority opinion.

The most powerful of all the arguments used by the game law reformers, and certainly the most persuasive, was that the existing laws actually encouraged men to become poachers. The anonymous author of Three Letters on the Game Laws pointed out that the game laws had been formulated at a time when the landed gentry had been the sole influential class in Britain, but that now the

⁵³Sir William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England, II, 417.

new class of well-to-do people of the city also wanted game: "It is not because the poacher kills the game, that the poulterer buys it, and that I dress it; but it is because the Aldermen, the Directors, the Lord Mayor, the Squires, the Lords, and the Justices, will have it, that I dress it, that the poulterer buys it, and that the poor poacher kills it."⁵⁴ Romilly had realized how ridiculous and unjust it was to continue to impose harsh sentences on the poachers when game had become an accepted part of the diet of all people who wanted it and could afford it. If anyone was to be punished then logically it should be those monied persons who openly demanded game in the markets. As Crabbe points out, the townspeople know full well the extent to which poaching is carried on since they buy the game:

The well-known shops received a large supply,
That they who could not kill at least might buy
(lines 265-266).

Yet instead of prosecuting the "well-known shops" the squires waged war against the elusive poachers. Many poulterers testified that although they preferred not to deal in game, they were forced into the trade by the demands of their customers: "It is the general wish at present certainly of the trade, feeling, as others of the trade feel, a kind of reluctance and disinclination to trade in the article, but they are all, of course, compelled from their connections; if they [the customers] cannot get Game

⁵⁴Letter II, in The Pamphleteer, XI (1818), 351. The pagination is incorrect at this point and reads "451".

from one person, they can from another."⁵⁵

In Tale XV of Tales Crabbe had already described the type of country gentleman who believed that social evils could be kept under control if the poor were lashed extra hard so that the wealthy could go free. The old squire advised his young vicar:

Yet are there sinners of a class so low,
That you with safety may the lash bestow:
Poachers, and drunkards, idle rogues, who feed
At others' cost, a mark'd correction need;
And all the better sort, who see your zeal,
Will love and reverence for their pastor feel;
Reverence for one who can inflict the smart,
And love, because he deals them not a part
(Tales XV. 248-255).

The enforcement of the game laws was motivated in large part by the same hypocritical spirit evinced by this old squire. Often to the greatest men of the kingdom, the men who formulated the game laws, bought game for their tables. The difference was that they did not buy from the disreputable poacher himself but from a "respectable" tradesman. That this tradesman received game from poachers was conveniently forgotten.

Robert, because he is adventurous and despises hypocrisy, is soon led into smuggling and poaching when he sees respectable people countenancing the so-called criminal:

He saw connected with th' adventurous crew
Those whom he judged were sober men and true;
He found that some, who should the trade prevent,
Gave it by purchase their encouragement;
He found that contracts could be made with those
Who had their pay these dealers to oppose;
And the good ladies whom at church he saw,
With looks devout, of reverence and awe,

⁵⁵A poulterer's testimony in Report from the Select Committee (1823), p. 11.

Could change their feelings as they change their place,
 And, whispering, deal for spicery and lace:
 And thus the craft and avarice of these
 Urged on the youth, and gave his conscience ease
 (lines 160-171).

The result of this disclosure that Robert forms only one link in a long chain of economic connections further weakens any moral censure of the crime. If society actually encourages the thief, then part of the onus for the crime must fall on society. The author of Three Letters on the Game Laws claimed that everyone except the lord of the manor aided the poacher.⁵⁶ Furthermore, as Robert does not "sin" against God's laws but is guilty only in relation to man's laws, and since men do not want to maintain these laws, Robert becomes in one sense a hero. Nor does Robert need to be ashamed of himself; as Sydney Smith pointed out, "At present, no one has the slightest shame at violating a law which every body feels to be absurd and unjust."⁵⁷

To judge the smuggler-poacher one must first determine the type of offense he has committed, and then decide whether he is a criminal at all. One possible interpretation is that the smuggler-poacher is as guilty as any other thief, since he has trespassed on another's land and stolen valuable property. The opposing view is that he is a free man taking what rightly belongs to every man. Crabbe however neither condones nor condemns Robert's action; his view falls somewhere between the extremes.

⁵⁶Letter III, in The Pamphleteer, XI (1818), 367.

⁵⁷The Edinburgh Review, XXXI (1818-1819), 305.

Crabbe's open-minded portrayal of Robert was bound to annoy many of his Tory readers, and amongst this number was the reviewer for The Christian Observer who observed: "We are sorry indeed to find, that Robert the Poacher, during his nightly and nefarious trade, 'read his Bible.'" The reviewer continued, "We entirely doubt the fact; and we quote in our support the approved saying of an old divine, that 'either men will leave off sinning, or they will leave off praying.'"⁵⁸ Aside from missing the irony which Crabbe in this passage directed at Rachel's simple-mindedness, the reviewer has also missed Crabbe's point that the common people (indeed most of the population of England) did not believe poaching to be a sin against God.

Hatchard, who had been Crabbe's publisher, saw the review and sent a copy to Crabbe. Fortunately Crabbe's reply is still extant, for it shows that he had consciously attempted to portray Robert sympathetically. Crabbe wrote to Hatchard:

This Gentleman will pardon me, I hope, when I assure him that Smugglers pray and read their Bible: I do not mean by Smugglers, nocturnal Ruffians, who if they did not smuggle would rob, even in their Sense of the Word, but Men and Women engaged in the Buying and selling Goods which have not paid the legal Duties. These people look upon this as half of [an] adventurous but not criminal, not immoral Nature. I knew at one period of my Life two Villages, and I am convinced, nay I am almost certain, that if I except the Minister and 2 or 3 of the more opulent Farmers' Wives, there was not an Inhabitant in either who did not deal in this Trade, and this Gentleman will not

⁵⁸ Review of Tales of the Hall, in The Christian Observer, XVIII (1819), 665.

surely judge so hardly as to suppose, the instructed people of two populous Villages to be without piety or prayer. In truth, they are taught that illicit traffic is hazardous but not forbidden by their Religion.⁵⁹

Crabbe admits that some smugglers and poachers are driven into "desperate measures" and in these cases he concedes that they probably cease to be God-fearing men. But he concludes: "When my Smuggler turned poacher he probably used to read, to pray, and as far as he could, to think -- but I do not mean to dispute the Sentiment as a general one." As this letter shows, Crabbe had intended his readers to place much of the blame for Robert's actions, if blame there is to be, on society.

III

To gain some perspective on Crabbe's position, it may help to compare briefly "Smugglers and Poachers" with a poem written a few years earlier by Sir Walter Scott. Scott's "The Poacher" (1811) is of especial interest and value to a study of Crabbe's poem, not only because it is about poachers, but because it is written in imitation of Crabbe's style.⁶⁰ Scott wrote to

⁵⁹Letter to J. Hatchard, November 11, 1819, in The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 243.

⁶⁰The poem first appeared in the volume of The Edinburgh Annual Register for the year 1809, published in 1811. See Vol. II, Part II, pp. 591-595.

James Ballantyne, "Understand I have no idea of parody but of serious anticipation if I can accomplish it -- The subject of Crabbe is 'The Poacher' a character in his line but which he has never touched."⁶¹ Huchon finds Scott's poem "almost unreadable" and believes it to be "very like parody,"⁶² but this is an exaggeration. With its emphasis on retribution and the inevitable punishment of the guilty man, the poem definitely captures something of Crabbe's early style. Scott was at this time imitating the Crabbe of "The Parish Register." Lockhart claims that Crabbe, when he first read the poem, said, "This man, whoever he is, can do all that I can, and something more."⁶³

"The Poacher" begins very much in the style of The Borough, with one person telling another something of his village. The general theme of freedom versus authority is introduced immediately when the villager informs the visitor that he is wrong to believe that the laws work to the disadvantage of the ordinary people:

Like his, I ween, thy comprehensive mind
Holds laws as mouse-traps baited for mankind:
Thine eye, applausive, each sly vermin sees,

⁶¹Letter to James Ballantyne, October 23, 1810, in The Letters of Sir Walter Scott, ed. H.J.C. Grierson, I (1932-1937), 412. Scott was not altogether correct in saying that Crabbe had never described a poacher. Crabbe included a sketch of the "rustic infidel" who "poach'd the wood, and on the warren snared" in "The Parish Register" I. 787-823.

⁶²Huchon, p. 434, n. 2.

⁶³Lockhart claims that this statement is to be found in Crabbe's son's biography. See J.G. Lockhart, The Life of Sir Walter Scott (Edinburgh, 1902), III, 288. However Crabbe's biography contains no such statement.

That baulks the snare, yet battens on the cheese;
 Thine ear has heard, with scorn instead of awe,
 Our buckskinn'd justices expound the law,
 Wire-draw the acts that fix for wires the pain,
 And for the netted partridge noose the swain;
 And thy vindictive arm would fain have broke
 The last light fetter of the feudal yoke,
 To give the denizens of wood and wild,
 Nature's free race, to each her free-born child.⁶⁴

Scott leaves no doubt that he dislikes the poacher because he is a criminal, and that he believes the "grave stranger," a Radical, to be completely mistaken in his ideas about the injustice of the law. The "grave stranger" has apparently wished to argue that because the poor villagers have not been allowed the "rights of man," they are oppressed. A good Tory, Scott will have none of the argument and points to what happened in France as a result of the doctrine of the rights of man:

But mad Citoyen, meek Monsieur again,
 With some few added links resumes his chain.

During the war with France the example of Napoleon's arbitrary rule was constantly being used to convince all right-thinking Englishmen to abandon any attempts at reform. Tories were particularly concerned that Radicals in England would attempt to emulate the French example with regard to the game laws, since after the revolution anyone in France was allowed to hunt game. Thomas Paine's argument -- "The French constitution says, There shall be no game laws; that the farmer on whose lands wild game shall be found (for it is by the produce of his lands they are fed) shall

⁶⁴Sir Walter Scott, The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, ed. J. Logie Robertson (London, 1894), p. 712. The lines are unnumbered.

have a right to what he can take: That there shall be no monopolies of any kind"⁶⁵ -- had struck fear into the hearts of many of the upper class who regarded the law as a means to uphold their privileges.⁶⁶

Scott's most important argument against the doctrine of the rights of man is really the fundamentalist's argument that any tampering with the laws will inevitably lead to crime and criminals. Scott asks the stranger to accompany him and witness for himself the effects of the doctrine of the rights of man:

Come, view with me a hero of thine own!
One, whose free actions vindicate the cause
Of silvan liberty o'er feudal laws.

The example is the poacher, the man who claims that he takes only what belongs to all men. Since Crabbe's poacher resembles Scott's Edward Mansell, it is interesting to conjecture that Crabbe might have conceived "Smugglers and Poachers" as an answer to Scott's attempt to imitate his style. Edward Mansell is:

the lightest heart
That ever play'd on holiday his part!
The leader he in every Christmas game,
The harvest-feast grew blither when he came,
And liveliest in the chords the bow did glance
When Edward named the tune and led the dance.
Kind was his heart, his passions quick and strong,
Hearty his laugh, and jovial was his song.

In true Crabbe fashion (and here Scott shows that he had studied the early Crabbe of "The Parish Register"), Edward has one flaw

⁶⁵Rights of Man, 3rd ed. (London, 1791), pp. 61-62.

⁶⁶Lord Mountmorres told Frances Burney that he thought the game laws would bring the French Revolution to England. See Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay (London, 1843), V, 76 (Part II, for 1789).

which leads to his downfall. Edward "loved a gun." Edward's father treats the poaching lightly, saying: "'Twas but a trick of youth would soon be o'er, / Himself had done the same some thirty years before." But Scott's point is to show how a seemingly innocent fault can lead to a fatal fall. Edward Mansell associates with other criminals (as does Robert Shelley), and what begins as a "trick," soon grows into a way of life:

But he whose humours spurn law's awful yoke
Must herd with those by whom law's bonds are broke:
The common dread of justice soon allies
The clown, who robs the warren, or excise,
With sterner felons train'd to act more dread,
Even with the wretch by whom his fellow bled.

The inevitable result of the innocent poaching (as Crabbe has James predict of Robert), is that the poacher falls in with a crowd of hardened criminals, turns to more serious crimes, and ends with murder. Edward is captured by the gamekeeper, and in fighting to escape, kills him. After this murder Edward is transformed into the scum of society, "Black Ned." Obviously Scott is developing Crabbe's idea in "The Parish Register," that the breaking of even the most trivial law prepares the way for a life of crime. As Scott says to those who would defend the poacher:

No, scoffer, no! Attend, and mark with awe,
There is no wicket in the gate of law!
He that would e'er so lightly set ajar
That awful portal, must undo each bar:
Tempting occasion, habit, passion, pride,
Will join to storm the breach, and force the barrier wide.

Edward Mansell's end resembles that of Abel Keene, Jachin and Peter Grimes.

Scott however misses one important quality of Crabbe's presentation, a quality which lifts Crabbe into the rank of a major poet, and the omission of which leaves "The Poacher" in the ranks of third-rate social criticism. Crabbe never allows himself to lose sympathy with his characters. Peter Grimes, for instance, poached as a young man, but Crabbe does not repudiate Peter on this account. On the contrary, the reader feels that the crueller Peter becomes, the more he fascinates Crabbe. At the end of Book I of "The Parish Register," Crabbe introduces a carousing, free-thinking poacher, but far from condemning the man, Crabbe portrays his crimes and blasphemies with tremendous gusto and relish. The interest in and sympathy for the criminal, a quality evident in all of Crabbe's work, differentiates his portrayal of the poacher in "Smugglers and Poachers" from that of Scott's in "The Poacher." As soon as Edward Mansell begins breaking the law, the empathy between Scott and Edward is destroyed. For Scott, Edward Mansell is only a useful literary stereotype to refute the theory of the rights of man. Even in his early work, Crabbe never wrote poems with such a purpose in mind. As was seen, Crabbe occasionally mentioned the rights of man,⁶⁷ but even though he believed it to be a highly dangerous idea, he never set out to write a poem which didactically demonstrated the wrong effects of such a theory.

⁶⁷ Crabbe described the poacher in "The Parish Register" as one who called "the wants of rogues the rights of man" (I. 815).

Because Scott wished to demonstrate an idea -- that poaching is evil because it leads to greater evils -- he placed all the blame on the poacher. His poem implies that the game laws must not be changed, for if they were, such a change would only result in more "Black Neds." Written to demonstrate a single idea, "The Poacher" does not explore any of the social reasons that lead to poaching. Its texture is thin. Even had Crabbe agreed with Scott that poaching was dangerous to society, he would never have written in such a tendentious manner. For instance, in his description of Peter Grimes's cruelty to his apprentice boys, Crabbe becomes so interested in attempting to understand Peter that he is able to explain something of the social background which gave birth to such cruelty. Whereas most of Crabbe's characters reflect their environment, in Scott's poem the metamorphosis from Edward Mansell to Black Ned is blamed on Edward's own vicious will and the agency of such extraneous demons as Tom Paine. Where Scott seems to have no feeling for the social forces involved in poaching, Crabbe carefully erects a case for Robert in which the blame is distributed. In creating a story which demonstrates the complex social relations leading to poaching, Crabbe does not begin by refuting a highly abstract theory, but by exploring a concrete case of poaching.

Scott appears to be totally unaware of the arguments of the game law reformers; Crabbe shows that he is fully cognizant of their existence. In point of fact one had to be a completely benighted Tory not to realize that the game laws were

made for the benefit of the twenty or thirty thousand qualified persons at the expense of the other eight million or so common people.⁶⁸ This does not mean that Crabbe praises the poacher; Crabbe by no means takes up the position of Scott's "grave stranger" who approves of all the actions of the poacher. Instead he shows that both Scott's belief and that of the "grave stranger" are partially valid.

IV

"Smugglers and Poachers" has two points of climax, one minor and one major, both centring on James's capture of Robert for poaching. In both cases, Crabbe is able to earn a great deal of sympathy for Robert by his presentation of the law and those who administer it. Crabbe insists on raising an issue which would have been fatal to Scott's picture of the poacher as the villain of society. The issue at stake is the law itself and its justice.

⁶⁸ See Charles Chenevix Trench, The Poacher and the Squire, p. 122. The Select Committee of 1828 reported: "That the Laws which confine the Right of sporting or pursuing Game, and also the Possession of Game, to Persons having certain Qualifications, by Birth or Estate, are in some respects unjust, and should be amended," p. 4.

As has already been seen, the landed interest at this period steadily increased the severity of punishment for poaching out of all proportion to the crime. At the local level, the squires attempted to combat the poacher by increasing the number of armed gamekeepers, and ordering them to protect the game at all costs. Acts of Parliament had already given the gamekeeper authority to deal with suspicious people.⁶⁹ For instance they could search the houses of persons suspected of possessing game illegally, and seize firearms and dogs from those they believed were unqualified to keep them.⁷⁰ Nor were they absolutely required to obtain warrants for such actions. The gamekeeper, as well as the squire, was often the "little Nimrod" of the parish.⁷¹

When James begins to pursue his brother, Crabbe shows him motivated as much by vengeance as by justice. Although James had known for some time that his brother had been breaking the law, the

⁶⁹The Game Law Act of 1671.

⁷⁰See Richard Burn, The Justice of the Peace, II, 531.

⁷¹A notorious case occurred in Scotland when Lord Eglinton found Mungo Campbell, an excise officer and "notorious poacher," on his estate. Lord Eglinton demanded that Campbell give up his gun, and when Campbell refused, saying that he would part with his life first, Eglinton threatened him, with the result that Campbell fired and killed the noble Lord. Boswell's fiancée, Margaret Montgomerie, commented that Campbell should have allowed Eglinton to have the gun, and should then have taken the case to law: "Surely the law was open to him [Campbell]; if my Lord did an unwarrantable thing, he therefore ought to have sought his redress in that way." Letter to James Boswell, October 24, 1769, in Boswell in Search of a Wife, trade ed. (London, 1957), p. 358. Interestingly enough Galt included the story as a sketch in Annals of the Parish (Ch. xxii). All too often the gentry attempted to enforce their private interests through brute force under cover of the law. But on the subject of game they encountered a populace ready to defend with their lives their common law right to game.

news does not particularly affect him until he falls in love with Rachel. His enmity towards his brother and his passion for bringing him to "justice" date from the time he finds that Rachel and Robert are in love. When the love of the two brothers for Rachel turns them into enemies, Crabbe continues to portray Robert as the more honest of the two. When James attempts to win Rachel for himself by abusing his brother, one is immediately reminded of the devious and underhanded tricks of Blifil:

James talk'd of pity in a softer tone,
To Rachel speaking, and with her alone:
"He knew full well," he said, "to what must come
His wretched brother, what would be his doom."
Thus he her bosom fenced with dread about;
But love he could not with his skill drive out.
Still, he effected something -- and that skill
Made the love wretched, though it could not kill;
And Robert fail'd though much he tried, to prove
He had no guilt -- She granted he had love
(lines 223-232).

Robert on the other hand acts generously in refusing to malign his brother: "Robert, more generous of the two, avow'd / His scorn, defiance, and contempt aloud." While imputing the crime of poaching to Robert, Crabbe skilfully convicts James of something worse -- a lack of generous love.

When one brother is a keeper and the other a poacher, the outcome of the quarrel is predictable. After Rachel has rejected James and declared her love for Robert, James soon begins to pursue the poachers:

Thus they proceeded, till a winter came,
When the stern keeper told of stolen game.
Throughout the woods the poaching dogs had been;
And from him nothing should the robbers screen,

From him and law -- he would all hazards run,
 Nor spare a poacher, were his brother one --
 Love, favour, interest, tie of blood should fail,
 Till vengeance bore him bleeding to the jail
 (lines 233-240).

Not justice, but vengeance motivates James. When James says that nothing will hide the poachers "from him and law" the emphasis is on the word "him." The phrase "and law" is added as an after-thought. A good gamekeeper of course should be conscientious and vigilant in his duties, but James has reduced the conflict between himself and the poachers to a personal feud. The reason for this is revealed when James vows not to spare any of the poachers, even "were his brother one." James has identified the poachers with his brother Robert. Nor is he content simply to arrest his brother; he wants to take him "bleeding to the jail." James appears to be hunting down the poachers on the Old Testament formula of an "eye for an eye." Since the poachers take blood, James remains unsatisfied until he also draws blood.

After James's open avowal of the necessity of revenge, it is impossible to believe that Crabbe is not setting up a situation where much of the blame must rest with the forces of law and order. James again applies to Rachel, telling her that she must give up Robert because of his wickedness. But Rachel cannot be persuaded, with the result that when the poachers begin serious depredations, James renews his hunt for them in earnest:

James was enraged, enraged his lord, and both
 Confirm'd their threatening with a vengeful oath;
 Fresh aid was sought -- and nightly on the lands
 Walk'd on their watch the strong determined bands:

Pardon was offer'd, and a promised pay
 To him who would the desperate gang betray
 (lines 267-272).

While one can sympathize with the squire over the loss of his game, at the same time one recognizes that the violent rage of the lord and his gamekeeper is out of keeping. When Fielding described his old Tory, Squire Western, raging about game preserves, he believed he was describing a dying race. One sympathizes with Squire Western but one cannot take him seriously. As a result, when Crabbe, some seventy years later, exposed that the outdated notions of the Squire Westerns still live on, the situation appears no longer humorous but dangerous.

In describing the growing feud between Robert and James -- "James was enraged, enraged his lord" -- Crabbe is pointing out how easily the issue of poaching could turn into a blood feud between two sections of the community. How strongly a large portion of the country gentlemen felt about the question of game and how willing they were to defend their ancient feudal rights can easily be underestimated. Sydney Smith was well aware of the strong and often inhuman feelings aroused by game:

The punishments which country gentlemen expect by making game property, are the punishments affixed to offences of a much higher order: but country gentlemen must not be allowed to legislate exclusively on this, more than on any other subject. The very mention of hares and partridges in the country, too often puts an end to common humanity and common sense. Game must be protected; but protected without violating those principles of justice, and that adaption of punishment to crime,

which (incredible as it may appear) are of infinitely greater importance than the amusements of country gentlemen.⁷²

When the landed interest failed to cope with the economic forces that had antiquated the laws forbidding the sale of game, they were left no option but to hit out at the surface symptom, the poacher. The result was a fierce and highly personal battle between the squire and the poacher, with the squire transferring all his rage against economic forces he could not understand to the vulnerable and always suspect parish poor. This is not to say that the squire had no right to protect his game, but to point out that the frenzy, hysteria and personal rancour associated with the subject often destroyed even a semblance of justice. As Crabbe points out, the squire's desire for revenge against the poacher was in large part a cause of the increase in violence.⁷³

After Robert has been captured and sent to gaol, the poem would seem to be at an end, for Robert the poacher has received his just desert. But surprisingly enough, Crabbe introduces a new theme altogether -- the theme of justice from Measure for Measure. In so doing, he shows convincingly that the squire often used the harsh game laws as a tool to forward his own interests. Robert, it appears, has been charged with a capital offence, although Crabbe is not explicit about the exact nature of the charge. Possibly Robert is held under the Black Act of 1723

⁷²The Edinburgh Review, XXXI (1818-1819), 301.

⁷³For confirmation of this point, see the Report from the Select Committee (1828), pp. 90-91.

for deer-stealing at night while disguised; more likely, he is held under Lord Ellenborough's Act of 1803 whereby persons who presented a gun or tried to stab or cut "with Intent to obstruct, resist, or prevent the lawful Apprehension and Detainer of the Person or Persons so stabbing or cutting . . . or any of his, her, or their Accomplices for any Offences for which he, she, or they may respectively be liable by Law to be apprehended, imprisoned, or detained," should suffer death as a felon.⁷⁴ This law meant that the most hardened highwayman in the country might receive only a jail sentence, while a poacher could be hanged for resisting arrest. At any rate Crabbe points out that Robert seems certain to die if his brother James testifies against him. James reveals his true colours when he pretends complete indifference, declaring that he can do nothing but allow the law to run its course. He maintains that if the law calls him to testify against his brother then he will be forced to obey, and his brother must die. Yet he skillfully points out that if he is not called the court will be forced to free Robert because of lack of evidence.

Crabbe's point is that James is willing to save his brother's life, but at a price:

James knew his power -- his feelings were not nice --
 Mercy he sold, and she must pay the price
 (lines 317-318).

James tells Rachel he will have his lord dismiss the action if Rachel will give up Robert and promise to marry him. The parallel

⁷⁴43 Geo. III. c. 58. By this Act ten new capital felonies were created.

theme occurs in Measure for Measure when Angelo promises Isabella mercy for her brother Claudio if she will become his mistress.

The parallel is too close to be a coincidence. Crabbe must have intentionally wished to draw attention to Shakespeare's play and the type of questions asked there. Just as Angelo found himself unequal to the temptations of power, so James finds himself willing to sell mercy and bribe the girl he desires. Like Claudio, Robert proves too weak for the test and asks Rachel to save his life by marrying James.

While this Measure for Measure theme is interesting for the insight it gives into the brothers' personalities, Crabbe's use of it has important social ramifications. As has been shown, Crabbe was careful to point out the personal, vindictive causes of the feud between the poacher and the gamekeeper. Now he proceeds to demonstrate how the country gentlemen could bend the law arbitrarily to their own purposes. Crabbe is here raising several points often touched on by the game law reformers. By law, a man is presumed innocent until proved guilty. Yet in Robert's case everyone accepts that he has no chance, that the judge will sentence him to hang. However Robert's conviction was by no means certain if the jury had been picked impartially.⁷⁵ As the Select Committees on the game laws discovered, the farmers were by no means opposed to the poachers; often a jury of farmers

⁷⁵ Minor offences against the game laws were summarily judged by the local magistrates; serious offences were held over until the quarterly assizes. See Chester Kirby, "The English Game Law System," AHR, XXXVIII (1933), 251.

refused to find a poacher guilty. In several cases they even refused to convict a poacher who had shot and killed a keeper.⁷⁶

The lord who holds the power of life and death over Robert is certainly arbitrary, since he willingly hands over the case to his trusty gamekeeper. James, halfway between the landlord and the worker, was in an excellent situation to mediate between the two. But James is a stern and revengeful keeper. In effect Robert finds the law being administered by his brother, and the result, as has been seen, is not justice but the thwarting of justice for personal ends. A man charged with poaching could be convicted on the evidence of one man before a single judge. As Chester Kirby has pointed out, it was not unknown at this time for the squires to judge cases of poaching in which they themselves were the injured party.⁷⁷ Crabbe's presentation of the problem, with his emphasis on the power James holds over his brother, demonstrates how easily laws administered at the village level, which arouse deep feelings in all concerned, could be twisted to serve the personal ends of those in authority.

One of the reasons why Robert rebelled against society was his distrust of authority; he wanted to be his own master. Many people of Crabbe's time would have felt that he was unjustified, since they believed England's laws gave every individual ample scope to develop his talents. Yet what Crabbe brings out through

⁷⁶Report from the Select Committee (1828), pp. 75-78.

⁷⁷Chester Kirby, "The English Game Law System," AHR, XXXVIII (1933), 250-252.

ames -- "mercy he sold" -- is that since the upper class controls the laws, justice is denied Robert. In the England of 1819, Robert's belief, that as a poor man he could obtain neither freedom nor justice, is not entirely unwarranted.

In the best of circumstances, Robert would have been almost wholly at the mercy of the squire, since in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England, the village community was still tightly knit, with the squire the supreme ruler. If a worker angered or annoyed the squire by failing to pay his rent or by causing a disturbance, the squire had the power of law to punish the man. A few years after publishing Tales of the Hall Crabbe was made a Justice of the Peace in Wiltshire; one of his first tasks was to support his fellow magistrate, W.L. Bowles, in an appeal to the King to soften the penalty imposed by the local squires on a poor woman for stealing. The woman had been fined £40 and sentenced to six months' imprisonment for stealing some cups and saucers valued at four shillings and sixpence. When the squires were informed that they did not have the authority to fine the woman, they recalled her and changed the sentence to six months' solitary confinement.⁷⁸ Presumably such cases were the exception, but it was generally recognized that squires could be extremely arbitrary and capricious in their sentences, especially when the man before them was someone whom they found particularly objectionable, some rebel spirit who wished to see conditions changed.

⁷⁸Huchon, p. 462.

Crabbe further complicates the issue by having Robert escape from prison after Rachel has married James. Not knowing of James's promise to free Robert, the poachers make a daring raid on the prison. And Crabbe adds yet another twist of irony, for "in truth, a purposed mercy smooth'd their way, / But that they knew not -- all triumphant they" (lines 437-438). Allowing Robert to escape, instead of dropping the charges -- is that mercy? or self interest?

In the final section of the poem Crabbe begins to build toward his major climax by describing the expanding feud between the keepers and the poachers. Samuel Romilly had noted the bad effect that prison life and severe sentences usually had on poachers:

The imprisonment, however, which detected poachers are made to undergo, the idle and dissolute habits of life they contract, and the desperate and ferocious spirit which the very severities they are exposed to excite in them, form by degrees a large body of men ready for the commission of the most enormous crimes; and though the Game Laws cannot be considered as the principal, yet they certainly form one, and not the most inconsiderable, of the various causes of that terrible increase of crimes which we have lately witnessed.⁷⁹

Romilly also pointed out in another connection that to throw men into prison, fetter them, leave them for a time -- and then on second thought, order their release -- did not make the victims thankful for mercy, but hostile to society for its arbitrary

⁷⁹Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, III, 345.

actions.⁸⁰ Naturally enough, when Robert finds himself freed from prison, but with a capital charge still hanging over him, he becomes desperate. Again Crabbe's observations were confirmed by those of the Select Committees: "Those who have been once committed to gaol for poaching have seldom or ever left it off."⁸¹ After Robert returns to the forest, the war between the two brothers escalates until they face each other with two armies.

Since most of the community sympathized with the poacher,⁸² James has to muster his men and information by devious means:

James knew they met, for he had spies about,
Grave, sober men, whom none presumed to doubt;
For, if suspected, they had soon been tried
Where fears are evidence, and doubts decide
(lines 487-490).

In order to pursue the poachers James has found it necessary to corrupt the entire community and destroy the due process of law. E.P. Thompson has observed, "The employment of spies and of agents provocateurs after the Wars was the signal for a genuine outburst of indignation in which very many who were bitterly opposed to manhood suffrage took part."⁸³ That James had destroyed

⁸⁰This is one of the issues Romilly discussed in Observations on the Criminal Law of England (London, 1810).

⁸¹Report from the Select Committee (1828), p. 49.

⁸²William Bryan Cooke explained how "the feeling of the common people appeared to be in favour of the murderer, and against the keeper." See the Report from the Select Committee (1828), p. 75.

⁸³E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 82-83. Vicesimus Knox commented: "The employment of spies and informers is a virtual declaration of hostilities against the
[Contd.]

all semblance of law -- "where fears are evidence" -- is perhaps Crabbe's strongest indictment against him. Moreover such descriptions of James as a sort of secret policeman correspond well with what is known of the general character of the gamekeeper. Chester Kirby gives the following description:

Ideally he was a sober, honest, industrious man, with a knack for killing vermin, and a boldness and shrewdness which would not fail him in encounters with poachers In practice the gamekeeper served largely as a police officer, following suspicious characters about the manor in order to discover them poaching, watching snares in order to take the poacher who came for his booty, patrolling the fields at night. To him the poacher was in the same class as vermin, to be given no quarter beyond what the law required. Both he and his master could think of nothing more despicable than the surreptitious thief of the expensively raised and protected birds and hares.⁸⁴

One of the results of the Act of 1671 had been to transform the gamekeepers into an extension of the police force.⁸⁵ Because they worked for the squire, gamekeepers such as James had no interest in maintaining harmony in the parish, as did the constables, but only in serving the squire by ruthlessly hunting down all trespassers.

Contd.] people. It argues a want of confidence in them. It argues a fear and jealousy of them. It argues a desire to destroy them by ambuscade. It is, in civil government, what strategems are in a state of war." See The Spirit of Despotism, [ed. William Hone] (London, 1821), p. 34.

⁸⁴Chester Kirby, "The English Game Law System," AHR, XXXVIII (1933), 245-246.

⁸⁵In 1796 Pitt proposed in the House that game-keepers should be formed into a section of the militia. See William Cobbett's Parliamentary History (London, 1818), XXXII, 1211.

Most of the community fear James, because they are aware of his influence over the law, a law where "doubts decide."

The game laws had created a situation where England was being split into two opposing camps of the rich and the poor. The game law reformers warned that the poachers might join with active revolutionaries, such as the Luddites, to cause anarchy. Nor does Crabbe exaggerate the seriousness of the situation. Chester Kirby describes an actual game battle:

On the night of January 18, 1816, the first of the great game battles took place. Some thirty game watchers of Colonel W. Fitzhardinge Berkeley, Lord Ducie, and Miss Langley, patrolling the lands near Berkeley Castle, encountered a band, variously estimated at from fifteen to thirty in number, of poachers. The enemy drew themselves up in military array, advanced to battle, killed a gamekeeper, injured several others, and marched off in true martial spirit, crying "glory! glory!" It was afterwards discovered that the band had assembled at the home of their leader, a supposedly respectable farmer and rate collector, who furnished them with powder and flints for their guns, blacked their faces, and obliged them to take an oath "not to peach on each other." Though the "Bible" which the swearers kissed turned out to have been only a ready reckoner, the affray gave evidence of such discipline and organization that all the forces of law and order were brought to bear on it.⁸⁶

Although these battles undoubtedly caused considerable anxiety, very many people continued to place the blame entirely on the poacher. Better informed, Crabbe is prepared to see faults on both sides. His description of the informer who tells James of the poachers' meeting in the forest is phrased to hint a great deal

⁸⁶Chester Kirby, "English Game Law Reform," p. 364.

more than is ever openly stated:

But in this night a sure informer came:
 "They were assembled who attack'd his game;
 Who more than once had through the park made way,
 And slain the dappled breed, or vow'd to slay;"
 The trembling spy had heard the solemn vow,
 And need and vengeance both inspired them now
 (lines 499-504).

By "dappled breed" the spy of course means "deer," the point being that the slaying of deer was a more serious offence than the poaching of game. While the status of game remained in dispute, most people recognized that deer were property. Thus the spy informs James that Robert and his gang are deer slayers. But not exactly, for this "sure informer" claims they have "slain the dappled breed, or vow'd to slay." In lieu of better evidence, the intention is accepted as proof of the deed itself.

In pointing out that the squire has armed his gamekeepers, Crabbe again indicates that much of the responsibility for the game battles rests with the country gentlemen:

There was a call below, when James awoke,
 Rose from his bed, and arms to aid him took,
 Not all defensive! -- there his helpers stood,
 Arm'd like himself, and hastening to the wood
 (lines 509-512).

A few years after the publication of "Smugglers and Poachers" a judge in Lancashire ruled that a squire who armed his servants was to be held responsible for their actions.⁸⁷ This precedent horrified the country gentlemen, since it recognized that poachers could not be shot with impunity as vermin. The squire and James

⁸⁷ See the Report from the Select Committee (1828), pp. 81-

⁸⁸ Quoted from Letter II of Three Letters on the Game Laws, in The Pamphleteer, XI (1810), 327.

feel that poaching is a serious enough crime to warrant murder; they "would shoot the man who shot a hare" (line 527).

Crabbe was not the first to voice a warning about the violence of the squires. In 1816 the poachers themselves circulated a paper to the gentlemen and magistrates around Bath:

TAKE NOTICE: -- We have lately heard and seen that there is an Act passed, and whatever poacher is caught destroying the game is to be transported for seven years -- this is English liberty!

Now, we do swear to each other that the first of our company that this law is inflicted on, that there shall not one gentleman's seat in our country escape the rage of fire: we are nine in number, and we will burn every gentleman's house of note. The first that impeaches shall be shot. We have sworn not to impeach; you may think it a threat, but they will find it reality. The game laws were too severe before: the Lord of all men sent these animals for the peasants as well as for the prince. God will not let his people be oppressed; he will assist us in our undertaking, and we will execute it with caution.⁸⁸

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from such a paper was that something had seriously gone amiss with the working of the game laws, and that the time had come to re-examine them closely. However the only conclusion that a person such as Edward Christian drew from the paper was that the game laws needed to be still more strictly enforced:

The following horrible paper [the one quoted above] was lately sent to all the gentlemen in the neighbourhood of Bath. The language and style are superior to that of the general class of poachers and incendiaries. But the morality shews the intimate connection of

⁸⁸Quoted from Letter II of Three Letters on the Game Laws, in The Pamphleteer, XI (1818), 357.

the characters, and how the disregard and violation of property, unrepressed in one instance, would soon lead to the destruction and demolition of it upon every occasion.⁸⁹

In "Smugglers and Poachers" Crabbe countered such one-sided views as those of Edward Christian by showing that the severe game laws with their horrendous penalties demoralized both the poacher and gamekeeper. He agrees with the sort of comment made by Samuel Romilly when defending his Bill to repeal some of the unjust effects of the Bill of 1816⁹⁰ (the Bill which the poachers of Bath had opposed). Romilly said, "I took notice of the pernicious effects of our present system of game laws; and particularly observed upon that spirit of inhumanity and ferocity which it seemed to excite in all orders of persons, on whom it could be thought to produce any effect. It was not only in poachers, but in the preservers of game, that a savage disposition was every day becoming more manifest."⁹¹

In the figure of Rachel, Crabbe introduces an element of pathos which heightens the problem and at the same time helps to make it human. When Rachel arrives on the scene after the fatal shooting, she finds Robert close to death. Immediately she kneels to help him, and is stricken with grief as he dies in her arms. The keepers return with lights at this moment, so that Rachel's weeping is suddenly cut off by their excited but prosaic

⁸⁹A Treatise on the Game Laws, p. 293.

⁹⁰56 Geo. III. c. 130. Romilly's new measure of 1817, 57 Geo. III. c. 90, secured no material alterations.

⁹¹Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, III, 284.

explanations to the lord of the manor. The keepers, aghast to find Rachel weeping for a common poacher, primly warn her to stay away from her mortal enemy. In this scene Crabbe contrasts Rachel's impulsive, human reaction with the impersonalized response of the gamekeepers. Only when the keepers see that the two dead men were brothers do they realize the full extent of the evils of the game war:

Now, more attentive, on the dead they gazed,
And they were brothers: sorrowing and amazed,
On all a momentary silence came,
A common softness, and a moral shame
(lines 596-599).

Again Crabbe emphasizes the vitiating effect of the game laws; for this shame falls on everyone except the squire. For the first and only time in the poem, he speaks: "Seized you the poachers?" Unaffected by the sight of the two dead brothers, he wants to know only whether the other poachers were captured. His servants rise above the situation (and their master) to answer him: keeper

They fled,
And we pursued not -- one of them was dead,
And one of us; they hurried through the wood,
Two lives were gone, and we no more pursued.
Two lives of men, of valiant brothers lost!
Enough, my lord, do hares and pheasants cost!
(lines 600-605).

And in this reply rests Crabbe's own conviction; the protection of game is not worth the lives of men.

The poem however does not end with the dramatic twin deaths of the brothers and the reproach to the squire, for Crabbe adds a coda in which he explains the reaction of the rest of the

community to the battle. The coda can be seen as the manifestation of Crabbe's belief that life was not composed of a series of dramatic flourishes, or possibly as a wish on his part to round off the story by explaining what happens to Rachel. Neither of these answers proves entirely satisfactory, however, since the ending is in a completely different style from that of the rest of the poem, and in some ways seems to contradict it.

After the gamekeepers say to the lord of the manor, "Enough, my lord, do hares and pheasants cost!" Crabbe adds:

So many thought, and there is found a heart
To dwell upon the deaths on either part;
Since this their morals have been more correct,
The cruel spirit in the place is check'd;
His lordship holds not in such sacred care,
Nor takes such dreadful vengeance for a hare;
The smugglers fear, the poacher stands in awe
Of Heaven's own act, and reverences the law;
There was, there is a terror in the place
That operates on man's offending race
(lines 606-615).

The "heart" found to bewail the deaths of both poacher and keeper is of course Rachel's. In a poem which has attempted to point out how the game laws corrupt everyone's human instincts it is perhaps fitting that the last word should be given to the one who suffers most. But what is surprising, especially after the strong cry of resentment against the squire, is that Rachel does not feel any hostility towards a society which has killed the men closest to her. Apparently Rachel has suffered so intensely that she has gone beyond the possibility of further suffering and now awaits her heavenly reward. In many ways Rachel's reaction

resembles that of the women in Newgate who, feeling that they had been punished unjustly, were all the more assured that they would receive salvation. Elizabeth Fry noted: "There is an opinion, too, very prevalent among them, that those who suffer under such unjust and cruel sentences are sure of their salvation: their sufferings they have had in this life, and they will be rewarded in that which is to come."⁹²

Not only does Crabbe appear to hold out bright hopes for the future; the village also seems to have benefited by the death of the two brothers. Peace has been restored, or if not peace, then at least a truce. If any of Crabbe's Tory readers had begun to have doubts about Crabbe's own political credentials, then the following passage promising order and peace would have reassured them:

Such acts will stamp their moral on the soul,
And while the bad they threaten and control,
Will to the pious and the humble say,
Yours is the right, the safe, the certain way,
'Tis wisdom to be good, 'tis virtue to obey
(lines 616-620).

At first sight this passage might seem to undercut most of what Crabbe had to say in the poem; for "Smugglers and Poachers" reveals that no simple answer can be given to the question of whether the keeper or the poacher is to blame. Thus the platitude, "'Tis wisdom to be good, 'tis virtue to obey," seems wholly inapplicable as an answer.

⁹²Romilly records these statements from a conversation with Elizabeth Fry, February 27, 1818. See Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, III, 333.

G.R. Hibbard has commented that Crabbe's passages in which he describes the final disaster are "some of the most vivid and imaginative that he ever wrote" but that "in the end, Crabbe being Crabbe, the tale makes its moral points that the game laws are too hard, that poaching is wrong and that, 'Tis wisdom to be good, 'tis virtue to obey.'" ⁹³ Yet the point is surely that although Crabbe has made it appear as though he is speaking, and in fact he ends a verse paragraph with the platitude "'Tis wisdom to be good, 'tis virtue to obey," he begins the following verse paragraph with the crucial words:

So Rachel thinks, the pure, the good, the meek,
Whose outward acts the inward purpose speak
(lines 621-622).

The phrase "So Rachel thinks" parallels the earlier phrase "So many thought" which follows the line "Enough, my lord, do hares and pheasants cost!" The village girl that believed Robert was free from guilt because she was sure he read his Bible may be sympathetically portrayed, but she is not Crabbe's mouthpiece.

For too long now critics have fallen into the error of accepting whatever is said in the poems, no matter by whom or in what context, as Crabbe's own statement of belief. Yet in this case what the poem says is clearly at variance with what Rachel says. In the context of the poem's complex portrayal of the intricacies of the game law situation, Rachel's pious warning appears ironic. One has the feeling that Crabbe has given Rachel

⁹³G.R. Hibbard, "Crabbe and Shakespeare," in Renaissance and Modern Essays, ed. G.R. Hibbard (London, 1966), pp. 92-93.

the last word in order to prevent the confirmed Tories and sentimental moralists from taking umbrage at his daring to attack the squirearchy as well as the poachers. Of course it is "wisdom to be good," but as "Smugglers and Poachers" manifests, to know what is good is by no means easy -- especially when people are "taught that illicit traffic is hazardous but not forbidden by their Religion."⁹⁴ Rachel's speech appears ironic because she has failed to understand that within the context of the game laws, confused and controversial as they are, absolute moral statements cannot be made. For Crabbe such generalizations are always irrelevant to his poetry since his main concern is not with social problems per se but with individuals affected by social problems. In "Smugglers and Poachers" he shows how the basic premises of the game laws lead to a reductio ad absurdum in which brother kills brother. Nowhere does he state didactically which changes should be made in the game laws, for this is the job of the social reformer; rather he presents a story, the consequences of which testify to the need for basic changes in the structure of the game laws.

To find a discussion of poorness in Salica or the Hall, published in 1819, is somewhat surprising. A few years earlier the subject of improvement would have been highly topical, but by 1819 it was rarely mentioned. The source for this doubtless is

⁹⁴See above, pp. 496-497, Crabbe's letter to Hatchard. Crabbe's "Salica or the Hall" is a poem of only three years after the publication of "Smugglers and Poachers" and the poem says that he will include the poem in his collected works since it is "good".

interest in naval difficulties. When war broke out, the navy was found with the terrible task of finding sailors to man all its ships. The fact that the world was in a state of impressment, inevitably creating a public outcry which increased as the war continued and men were constantly pressed. But as soon as war ended, a large navy was no longer needed, ships were decommissioned, sailors demobilized. Many of the sailors who had been pressed in the Napoleonic wars because of the "press gang" came into the country and were found in the streets. These sailors then

CHAPTER 8

"AND GANGS CAME PRESSING"

In "Ruth" (Book V, Tales of the Hall), Crabbe introduces yet another instance of a social abuse in need of reform, naval impressment. Unlike "Smugglers and Poachers," where the entire book is devoted to a study of the game laws, in "Ruth" the press gang incident forms only a small part of the whole, occupying sixty-two lines in a story of four hundred and sixty-seven. Still the press gang is central to the story; indeed one of its high points.

To find a discussion of press gangs in Tales of the Hall, published in 1819, is somewhat surprising. A few years earlier the subject of impressment would have been highly topical, but by 1819 it was rarely mentioned.¹ The reason for this decline in

¹In his Reminiscences, published only three years after Crabbe's poem, Charles Butler mentions his pamphlet "On the Legality of Impressment Seamen" which he wrote for the government. He says that he will not include the pamphlet in his collected works since

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interest is not difficult to determine. When a war broke out, the navy was faced with the formidable task of finding sailors to man all its ships. The Admiralty would then introduce impressment, inevitably creating a public outcry which increased as the war continued and men were constantly pressed. But as soon as war ended, a large navy was no longer needed: ships were decommissioned, sailors demobilized. This pattern was accentuated in the Napoleonic wars because of the vastness of their scale. More sailors than ever before were required; consequently the "hot press" came into operation throughout England. As the demand for seamen rose, the Admiralty became desperate; the navy began to press not only seamen, but ordinary people off the streets as well.² Public opinion against impressment mounted until it was at its highest point ever "during the years immediately preceding 1815."³ Had Crabbe published "Ruth" at this time, his discussion of impressment would have added a new dimension to an already heated argument. But with the end of the war in 1815, public attention shifted overnight from the evils of impressment to the problem of absorbing

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"the subject has long ceased to be a topic of discussion." Reminiscences of Charles Butler (London, 1822), p. 68. Surprisingly enough, Butler's pamphlet appeared in its 3rd edition two years later in 1824. See The Pamphleteer, XXIII, 225-287. Obviously impressment was not yet a completely dead issue.

²Pitt's Quota Acts of 1795 first implicitly recognized the Admiralty's right to press landmen.

³Elie Halévy, A History of the English People in 1815, transl. E.I. Watkin and D.A. Barker (London, 1924), p. 51.

thousands of unemployed seamen.⁴

Why Crabbe chose to write in 1819 about press gangs when the subject was little discussed is unknown.⁵ Of course the possibility exists that Crabbe wrote the poem prior to 1815, but did not find the opportunity to publish it. Jeffrey might well have had a hand in encouraging Crabbe to write on the subject of impressment, since in his review of The Borough in 1810, he had mentioned: "We are struck, also, with several omissions in the picture of a maritime borough. Mr. Crabbe might have made a great deal of a press-gang"⁶ Whatever Crabbe's intentions may have been, the absence of press gangs on the Thames after 1815 removed the atmosphere in which an attempt to rejuvenate the subject could meet with interest. None of the journals reviewing Tales of the Hall commented on Crabbe's attack.⁷ John

⁴The run-down of the navy was completed by 1817. The total manpower of the navy was reduced from 145,500 to 19,000 in three years. See Michael Lewis, The Navy in Transition 1814-1864: A Social History (London, 1965), p. 176. However as late as 1824 members of Parliament were still presenting petitions asking that "the present system" of impressment be altered. See The Parliamentary Debates, March 18, 1824, N.S. X, 1220.

⁵In 1961 Thomas Brumbaugh published a hitherto unknown Crabbe sermon which contains a possible reference to impressment. In an attempt to give an analogy to divine redemption, Crabbe says: "Conceive to yourselves (a case too which has often occurred) some of your fellow citizens, groaning under the chains of captivity, the galling shackles of cruel bondage. . . ." He then describes how the citizens of the town succeed in ransoming their friends from the ship. Brumbaugh suggests a date around 1814. See Notes and Queries, CCVI (1961), 20-21.

⁶The Edinburgh Review, XVI (1810), 53.

⁷The following journals contain reviews of Tales of the Hall: Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, V (July 1819), 469-483; The British Critic, 2nd Series, XII (September 1819), 285-301;
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Wilson of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine found the story of "Ruth" well written: "Never was hopeless distress, day by day persecuted unto the death, delineated with such fearful truth."⁸ But in quoting a long passage from the story, he deliberately excluded any mention of the press gangs by beginning his quotation at the point where the attack on press gangs finished. Five or six years earlier, such an omission might have been construed as deliberate Tory strategy to ignore social criticism. But in 1819, when the press was seldom used, a more likely reason for the neglect of Crabbe's attack was a lack of interest in the subject itself.

That the tone of Crabbe's social criticism tended to be cautious has been noted before. "Ruth" offers no exception. The story begins when Ruth and a young sailor fall in love and wish to marry. Ruth's parents persuade the young couple to wait until they have security, but passion proves too strong for good intentions, and Ruth's pregnancy forces an immediate marriage. Shortly before the wedding, however, war breaks out, and a press gang sweeps into the village to carry young Thomas away to sea.⁹

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The Christian Observer, XVIII (October 1819), 650-668; The Eclectic Review, N.S., XIII (February 1820), 114-133; The Edinburgh Review, XXXII (July 1819), 118-148; The Monthly Review, XC (November 1819), 225-238.

⁸Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, V (July 1819), 475.

⁹One of the reasons Allen Booth (Tale II, Tales) is prevented from returning to England is that war breaks out and he is impressed (II. 391-394).

Ruth, unwed, has to bear the baby alone. Heartbroken that her daughter was not allowed to marry Thomas before he was taken away, Ruth's mother bitterly criticizes the practice of impressment:

They say such things must be -- perhaps they must;
 But, sure, they need not fright us and disgust;
 They need not soul-less crews of ruffians send
 At once the ties of humble love to rend.
 A single day had Thomas stay'd on shore,
 He might have wedded, and we ask'd no more
 (lines 199-204).

This criticism is aimed, not at the general principle of impressment, but at its brutal administration. Furthermore in portraying Thomas as a sailor instead of a landsman, Crabbe ensures that the least objectionable type of impressment is exemplified. William Pitt's Quota Acts of 1795, permitting landsmen to be pressed, had aroused bitter objections. Had Crabbe wished to give an extreme example of impressment he would have made Thomas a field labourer or a clerk.¹⁰

Impressment made a mockery of Locke's statement at the beginning of the century that "every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself."¹¹ Today, when the whole idea of impressment seems repugnant and contrary to basic freedoms, Crabbe's type of criticism may appear a case of "too little too late." Commenting on Crabbe's treatment of impressment, James McPhee has suggested that Crabbe's views are

¹⁰ In *Tales*, when George the sailor hears that war has been declared, he says: "Press'd, I must go; why, then, 'tis better far / At once to enter like a British tar" (*Tales* XX. 65-66).

¹¹ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. J.W. Gough (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1956), p. 15 (Ch. v, Sec. 27).

perhaps overly conservative.¹² I have no wish to suggest that Crabbe's criticism was timely, but I feel that his presentation sets out the main objections to impressment in a way that few of his fellow social critics equalled. One should recall that although today the idea of impressment is regarded with abhorrence as a cruel and unjust version of the secret police, the eighteenth and early nineteenth century opinion differed considerably. This is not an attempt at special pleading for Crabbe, but since the issues involved are elusive, a proper understanding of contemporary ideas on impressment will help to clarify Crabbe's position.

Impressment was something of an anomaly in England.

Although not confirmed by statute, it had been used to man the navy for so long that it had become a part of common law. In a short note on impressment, A. Aspinall summarizes the situation:

Impressment was not specifically recognized by statute, but, having been practised from time immemorial, the lawyers recognized that it had become a part of the common law. It was not seriously challenged by the Whig Opposition during the war (when they were in office, in 1806, they made no attempt to end it), but if the press-gang captains abused their powers, the House of Commons might hear of it -- as in 1814 when Whitbread denounced impressment as a means of breaking a strike of merchant seamen.¹³

On any issue involving the rights of the common people one might expect to find the lawyers on the side of stability and the status

¹²James McPhee, "Humanitarianism in English Poetry from Thomson to Wordsworth," unpublished dissertation (Edinburgh 1962), p. 458.

¹³English Historical Documents 1783-1832, ed. A. Aspinall and E. Anthony Smith, XI (London, 1959), 874.

quo; the surprising feature in the case of impressment is how widespread was the belief in its legality.

When Ruth's mother agrees reluctantly that impressment is perhaps necessary, she is not advancing a reactionary or timid viewpoint, but one held by many of the most advanced minds of the period. For instance David Hume, in his essay "Of Some Remarkable Customs" (1742), mentions impressment. As a general principle he maintains that to allow the magistrates to usurp even the smallest power not given them by law is bad policy, but he notes:

There is, however, one occasion where the Parliament has departed from this maxim; and that is, in the pressing of seamen. The exercise of an irregular power is here tacitly permitted in the crown; and though it has frequently been under deliberation how that power might be rendered legal, and granted, under proper restrictions, to the sovereign, no safe expedient could ever be proposed for that purpose; and the danger to liberty always appeared greater from law than from usurpation. When this power is exercised to no other end than to man the navy, men willingly submit to it from a sense of its use and necessity; and the sailors, who are alone affected by it, find nobody to support them in claiming the rights and privileges which the law grants, without distinction, to all English subjects.¹⁴

Significantly enough, Hume discusses the subject of impressment because it offers unique features. He speaks of it being "singular and unexpected." Impressment was hardly ever classified with other infringements of civil rights.

"Junius" expressed much the same opinion on press gangs. In the best tradition of concern for individual freedom, "Junius"

¹⁴David Hume, Essays Moral, Political and Literary (London, 1963), p. 379.

declared, "I regard the legal liberty of the meanest man in Britain, as much as my own, and would defend it with the same zeal." But he added that the right of impressment must be treated as an exception: "[It is] founded originally upon a necessity, which supersedes all argument."¹⁵ Thus it would seem that many of even the most intelligent and liberal thinkers of the time gave their sanction to impressment. Nor were they entirely wrong, for as Michael Lewis, historian of the navy, points out, impressment was an early form of conscription.¹⁶ In an economy which could not afford a large standing navy, some sort of coercion was necessary to man the navy in time of war.

In spite of the support of people such as "Junius" and Hume, voices were raised against impressment. One of the loudest and most vehement was that of Admiral Patton. In his book The Natural Defense of an Insular Empire (1810), Patton expressed in no uncertain terms his belief that the present system of impressment could not hope to man the navy well. Since his book was published

¹⁵The Letters of Junius, ed. C.W. Everett (London, 1927), Letter LIX, pp. 252-253.

¹⁶Michael Lewis says, "It is hard to find fault with this governmental claim to exercise the right of impressment in wartime. For though from time to time lawyers and opposition politicians challenged it, it was only too patently necessary under the conditions which then controlled our nautical undertakings. It assumed the guise, in fact, of the inalienable right of every sovereign state to summon its own people to its -- and their own -- defence in times of military emergency. Nor was there anything wrong with Impressment when thus viewed: every state which is sovereign must possess this power: and no one, barring the few sea-lawyers, ever challenged the State's inalienable right to exercise it." The Navy in Transition 1814-1864, p. 171.

at a time when Britain was at war with France, and needed seamen desperately, Patton's attack on impressment aroused furious replies. The Quarterly Review lashed out at what it considered to be "foul and malignant libels on our brave seamen":

It is known, and has long been a subject of regret, that the mode of manning the fleet forms an anomaly in the constitution of our free government; but so much have imperious necessity and long usage sanctioned the practice, that the most violent reformers and outrageous philanthropists have carefully abstained from bringing a subject of so delicate a nature into public discussion.¹⁷

Although the reviewer might like to think that impressment had never before been challenged (and compared with other issues, it was challenged seldom), such a statement is of course patently untrue.¹⁸ In 1740 Sir Robert Walpole pointed out the unsuitability of impressment;¹⁹ in 1777 Temple Luttrell had gone so far as to introduce a bill for "more easy and effectual Manning of the Navy."²⁰

The belief that impressment was necessary to Britain's safety undoubtedly influenced artists in their attitude to the problem. When Crabbe wrote his attack on press gangs he had no

¹⁷The Quarterly Review, IV (1810), 329.

¹⁸See Daniel A. Baugh, British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole (Princeton, 1965), pp. 147-240. Baugh has revealed that a great deal of opposition existed earlier in the century.

¹⁹See William Cobbett (ed.), Parliamentary History of England . . . 1066 to . . . 1803, XI, 428. I am indebted to D. Baugh for this information. Walpole was driven to this position by his own experience with the manning problem.

²⁰Parliamentary History, XIX, 81-103.

literary tradition on which to rely. One might assume that Crabbe was a latecomer in a long debate, but this is not the case. Although press gangs had caused widespread misery, the subject was little discussed in eighteenth century literature. Fielding introduced a small incident in Tom Jones (1749), when he has Lady Bellaston suggest to Lord Fellamar that Tom could be impressed:

"I am thinking, my lord," added she, "(for this fellow is too mean for your personal resentment), whether it would not be possible for your lordship to contrive some method of having him pressed and sent on board a ship. Neither law nor conscience forbid this project: for the fellow, I promise you, however well dressed, is but a vagabond, and as proper as any fellow in the streets to be pressed into the service" (XVI, viii).

However the incident occupies only a few lines, and Fielding never pursues the topic. His satire is directed not against the general principle of impressment, but against its abuse. Similarly when Smollett has Roderick Random impressed aboard the "Thunder" (Ch. xxiv), he never alludes to the rightness or wrongness of the action. His concern is with the terrible naval conditions.

For an open attack in literature on the injustice of impressment, an outside observer seemed to be needed. In a short sketch which he had originally intended as part of his description of English life and manners, Lettres philosophiques, Voltaire describes his first meeting with an instance of impressment.²¹ In a boat on the Thames one day, his oarsman boasted to

²¹Two editions of the French text appeared in 1734; Lettres philosophiques and Lettres . . . sur les Anglois. An English translation by John Lockman, Letters Concerning the English Nation, had been published in London in 1733.

him about English liberty. The following day Voltaire saw the same man held in irons in prison -- pressed for the navy. Voltaire comments: "The man's misfortune, and such crying injustice, sensibly affected me."²² But Voltaire's next comment is significant. While admitting his surprise at finding impressment in England, he declares that he will remain thankful it is only one injustice amidst so much freedom. Even Voltaire does not treat impressment as a matter requiring immediate reform.

Maria Edgeworth was one of the few writers openly to condemn the injustice of impressment. In her novel Patronage (1814), she inserted a long section on impressment, obviously in response to the popular outcry against its increased use at this period. Count Altenburg (who appears to be Miss Edgeworth's spokesman at this point) sums up his argument with the claim that impressment "depended on the assertions of those who maintained, that a navy could not exist without a press-gang."²³ Obviously Maria Edgeworth believed the time had come to examine closely the evidence the Admiralty offered for refusing to overhaul the system of impressment. However most of Miss Edgeworth's argument against impressment is

²²This incident of the pressed man is part of a section which Voltaire had originally planned to form the beginning of the book. However it was not included until Kehl's edition of 1785. See Voltaire's England, ed. D. Flower (London, 1950), pp. 1-7.

²³Patronage, 2nd ed. (London, 1814), II, 325 (Ch. xxiii). In "The Female Vagrant" (1798) Wordsworth mentions the press gang's "noisy drum," but in his version, the people are eager to volunteer. Apparently the difficulty of the times made even naval pay appear attractive. There was, of course, also a bonus for those who volunteered.

based on the progressive's belief that the liberty of the individual is sacrosanct. No matter how appealing such an argument might seem, fundamentally it breaks down at a crucial point.

England needed sailors to man her navy. In claiming the right of impressment the Admiralty was claiming a right which is still upheld today in most countries of the world.

Crabbe avoids the pitfalls of Maria Edgeworth's argument by approaching the subject of impressment from an entirely different standpoint. In "Ruth," he is obviously playing on the emotions of his readers, attempting to make them feel the sufferings of those wronged by impressment. At first sight the story -- a bride on the eve of marriage mourning for her lover wrested away by a brutal press gang -- may seem melodramatic and sentimental. Yet Crabbe's story is not without precedent and may well have been drawn from one of many actual cases. For instance in 1770 an incident occurred, which if told in a story, would seem incredible:

This morning Michael Thomas, a black, and Ann Brandley, a white, were married at St. Olave's, Southwark; but while the ceremony was performing, a press-gang interrupted the minister in the celebration of his office; upon which a contest arose, and the clergyman received a blow on the breast "24

As Lecky has so pointedly commented, "the enormous cruelty and injustice of the impressment for the navy, as it was actually carried on, can hardly be exaggerated, and it seemed doubly

²⁴The Annual Register (1770), p. 161.

extraordinary in a country which was so proud of its freedom."²⁵ Crabbe's seemingly melodramatic story is not nearly so horrific as many recorded incidents.

Furthermore Crabbe's construction of the incident is a curious mixture of emotional appeal and reasoned argument. The story itself, with Thomas' impressment immediately before his marriage, is undoubtedly designed to gain the sympathy of the reader. But when Ruth's mother begins her comments on impressment, her criticism is neither hysterical nor emotional. Hannah's opening statement is typical of Crabbe's ironical method: "They say such things must be -- perhaps they must." The emphasis is on the word "they," the implication being that others disagree. Crabbe does not openly call the general principle of impressment in question, but clearly Hannah's afterthought, "perhaps they must" (my italics), insinuates that at least some people found the reasons for impressment unconvincing. The line also permits of two interpretations, depending on the reference of the second "they." On one level, Hannah implies that possibly impressment is necessary, possibly not. On yet another, she is saying that they (i.e. the authorities) are forced to say impressment is necessary (in order to cover a nasty situation). Which of the alternatives is correct Crabbe does not say; he leaves the question open.

Hannah criticizes impressment, not on the specious issue of natural rights, but on the pragmatic consideration that it

²⁵W.E.H. Lecky, A History of England in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1892), IV, 341.

undermines public spirit:

But will that public spirit be so strong,
Fill'd, as it must be, with their private wrong?
(lines 213-214)

Crabbe notices that although press gangs may fill the navy's ships, they also undermine the morale of the country. A nation which finds that it must resort to injustice to defend itself may find that it has nothing worth defending. Crabbe then moves the argument one stage further. Instead of appealing to the rights of the citizen, he suddenly confronts the state with some positive remedies, not for impressment, but for press gangs:

Sure, if they must upon our children seize,
They might prevent such injuries as these;
Might hours -- nay, days -- in many a case allow,
And soften all the griefs we suffer now.
Some laws, some orders might in part redress
The licensed insults of a British press,
That keeps the honest and the brave in awe,
Where might is right, and violence is law
(lines 219-226).

Most of the apologists for impressment managed to avoid mentioning moral or legal questions by pleading utility. Writers such as Maria Edgeworth had attempted to counter this argument by pleading natural rights. Where Crabbe differs is in the way he cuts to the heart of the problem by attacking the press gangs instead of impressment. He notes how the press gangs have brought about situations where "might is right, and violence is law," and concludes that even if England requires impressment, the press gang is not a necessary corollary.

David Hume had believed that in the one instance of
determine upon... The Spectator (1770), p. 122.

impressment it was practical to allow the magistrates the arbitrary power involved in press warrants. But in arriving at this decision founded on utility, Hume counted the unhappiness of the sailors for little. This Crabbe refused to allow. Why should the feelings of pressed men -- and after 1795 the press had been extended to all men of the lower class -- count for little?

Crabbe brings the story of the press gang to an end with biting irony. After telling the shocked Richard about Thomas's impressment, Hannah attempts to calm his fears and comfort him. She assures him that the only people worried by the injustices of impressment are themselves -- hardly a comforting thought:

Be not alarm'd, my child; there's none regard
What you and I conceive so cruel-hard:
There is compassion, I believe; but still
One wants the power to help, and one the will,
And so from war to war the wrongs remain,
While Reason pleads, and Misery sighs, in vain
(lines 227-232).

The addition of the phrase, "I believe," subtly implies that Hannah only assumes compassion exists for the pressed men; she has never actually seen any.²⁶ The irony lies in the reason Hannah gives why only the lower classes feel the misery of the press gangs: they are the only people affected. Even if pressed by error, a

²⁶ A typical incident is the following. In 1770, the outgoing Lord Mayor of London said that he had issued press warrants because the state of the nation required him to do so, and "though he had his doubts with respect to the legality of press-warrants, yet, as an individual, though in so high a station, he thought it too weighty a matter for him singly to determine upon." See The Annual Register (1770), p. 162.

gentleman could always obtain a release. A few years earlier, in a letter to Mary Leadbeater, Crabbe had already expressed his belief that members of Parliament had little desire to help the lower classes:

by which I am sorry for your account of the fever among your poor. Would I could suggest any thing! I shall dine with one of our representatives to day; but such subjects pass off: all say, "Poor people, I am sorry," and there it ends.²⁷

In his comments on "Ruth" the reviewer for The British Critic acknowledged the poem's power to move the reader, but complained:

We rise from it with an oppressive and painful conviction, that such things may occur, probably have occurred, in real life; and that their solution must for ever be denied to our present faculties.²⁸

Crabbe of course never suggests that tragedies such as Ruth's will be avoided in future, but surely he shows how they could be avoided. While Crabbe would not have agreed with a writer such as Vicesimus Knox who believed all man's troubles would be removed with the reform of bad government,²⁹ clearly the poem implies that Ruth would never have been driven to suicide had the system of impressment been less inhuman. Crabbe points to a solution when he suggests a reform of the methods of impressment.

Yet certainly in "Ruth" Crabbe was not solely interested

²⁷Letter to Mary Leadbeater, c. August 1817. Quoted from Life, Ch. ix, p. 258.

²⁸The British Critic, N.S., XII (1819), 291.

²⁹[Vicesimus Knox], The Spirit of Despotism (London, 1821), pp. 7-8.

in recommending reform. What permits Crabbe to rise above the concerns of the social critic to those of the artist is his refusal to lay all the blame for man's problems on society. In "Ruth" the system of naval impressment is merely one of many forms by which man "impresses" his fellow men. Throughout Crabbe criticizes the way in which people allow systems and ideologies to control their lives, leaving no room for the fundamental feelings of benevolence. For instance Hannah and her husband are members of one of the narrow dissenting religious sects which disapproved of art. When Thomas is reported dead, and a minister of the sect begins to court Ruth, Ruth's father ignores the wishes of his daughter and demands that she marry the minister even though she loathes him. Caught up in his "religious beliefs," the minister also refuses to consider Ruth's feelings, and demands that she love him. The tyranny of Ruth's father and would-be lover is a subtle variation of the tyranny of the press gang. Just as the people rejected the press gangs, so Ruth "when press'd" by the minister's demands "rejected him" (line 294). Driven to despair by the cruelty of her father and the minister, both of whom wield unfeeling authority, Ruth finally commits suicide. Crabbe's comment at this point might well be applied to the case of the press gangs:

but, dearest boy, when man,
Do not an ill because you find you can.
Where is the triumph? when such things men seek,
They only drive to wickedness the weak
(lines 355-358).

In Ruth's case the wickedness was her suicide, but in the general case of society, the result might be mutiny or revolution.³⁰

The minister, a self-deceiver, allowed himself to believe he was right in attempting to force Ruth into marriage; the government deluded itself that England could be protected only through the impressment of the lower classes.

Crabbe's point, that the way to attack impressment was through the press gangs, is a significant innovation. When Hannah says that "Reason pleads, and Misery sighs" for change, she is undoubtedly correct. But had Crabbe left his remarks at this point, they would have been valueless, since everyone agreed that impressment was an embarrassing anomaly in free England. Nor was there any sense in arguing that the country did not possess the right to call its citizens to its defense. Nearly everyone agreed that the government did, and should, have this power. What Crabbe has revealed (today it seems obvious) is that the method of impressment could be modified. The reason the government could maintain the system of impressment was that the lower classes had

³⁰ Needless to say people pressed into the navy did not always submit to their fate calmly. There were many incidents of desertion, some on a large and dangerous scale. The Annual Register recorded: "A tender sailing down the river full of impressed men, was suddenly stopt by the captives, who found means to open one of the hatches, and immediately issued upon deck; where, forming in a body, they overpowered the Officers and crew, and made themselves masters of the vessel without much violence or any bloodshed. The victors run the tender ashore at Grays, in Essex, to the number of 110, from whence they marched into the country, and divided into two bodies The catastrophe was only some of the Officers landing at Gravesend with black eyes." The Annual Register (1770), p. 147. The humour is, I am sure, unintentional. A month later The Annual Register recorded how the seamen of a merchant ship, on seeing a man-of-war approach, seized their ship's arms and forcibly drove the man-of-war away.

no leaders prepared to protest against the unnecessary brutality. Few Radicals argued strenuously that the government was at fault in refusing to improve the terrible naval conditions that stopped men from volunteering.³¹ Unemployment was high, and had naval conditions and pay been improved, men would not have hesitated to join for a term.

As Michael Lewis has observed, the government could have continued with impressment, and made it work reasonably well, had it been ready to reform its methods. Crabbe knew only too well that when the government found it could treat the lower classes unjustly without raising significant political dissent, it would continue to do so. Michael Lewis comments:

The system might have worked if the State had played the game. But it had not. Successive Governments, knowing that they had the ultimate sanction of compulsion, allowed the standards of pay and living to fall well below those obtaining in the Merchant Navy, themselves rather low. They were in fact ignoring the laws of economic competition, so that they failed, by a very wide margin, to attract voluntary recruitment What was wrong was not the principle, which still applies in the form of National Service, conscription, and such like, but the method. It was this which gave to impressment in Britain and to its executants, the press gangs, the names which, so rightly and for so long, stank in the nostrils of Britons.³²

³¹The naval mutinies at the Nore and Spithead in April and May 1797 were caused partly by the incredibly bad conditions of food and pay and the harsh discipline officers had to maintain over the impressed seamen, but the mutineers appear also to have been inspired by "social revolutionary" ideas. See G.E. Manwaring and Bonamy Dobrée, The Floating Republic (Edinburgh, 1935).

³²Michael Lewis, The History of the British Navy (London, 1957), pp. 183-184.

Thus when Crabbe emphasized the need to reform the methods of impressment, he had found the weak spot in the argument, and anticipated the many later changes which modified impressment completely.³³ Unfortunately his criticisms seem to have gone largely unnoticed, appearing as they did at a time when interest in the subject had declined.

CHAPTER 9

"WE CANNOT AID THE LOVELY VAGRANT RUSTIC"

With the exception of "The Shipwreck" and "The Shipwrecked," and "Roth," *Falconer's Hall* contains little direct social criticism. Nevertheless the poem is important for this study of Crabbe's social ideas because it reveals Crabbe's attitude toward the poor and the unemployed. The poem is a narrative of a shipwreck and the subsequent search for survivors.

³³ Interestingly enough, impressment has never been made illegal. But the navy reformed the conditions of service until the need to recruit forcibly no longer existed. In 1835 an act was passed by which men who had once been impressed, and who had served five years or more, were to be exempt from further impressments. However even then Sir James Graham, first lord of the Admiralty, upheld the right of the government to demand the service of its citizens. The introduction of five year terms in 1853 helped greatly to make naval life attractive.

the type of knowledge which it all should require. It is not only adjustment is not political and social but psychological. The aim is first to show the reasons why Crabbe suggests that the answers to be found in political matters are in relation to the needs of the individual, and secondly, to examine Crabbe's presentation of some of the problems of the individual in his criticism of the good life. And to show how Crabbe's ideas are related to Crabbe's own poetry and to the social conditions of his time.

CHAPTER 9

"WE CANNOT ALL THE LOVELY VASE RESTORE"

I

With the exception of "Smugglers and Poachers" and "Ruth," Tales of the Hall contains little direct social criticism. Nevertheless the poem is important for this study of Crabbe's social ideas because it reveals Crabbe's belief that the individual bears a responsibility to adapt to social requirements and circumstances. The job of the social critic is generally to show how social conditions can be improved for the benefit of the people. But if he is genuinely interested in the happiness of individuals, then he is forced to admit that the process of adaption is a two-way process. Not only do institutions need to be reformed to meet the needs of the people, but individuals require advice about the values and behaviour best suited to society. Crabbe's approach to this subject is particularly interesting because he shows that

the type of knowledge which individuals require to make this adjustment is not political and social but psychological. My aim is first to show the reasons why Crabbe suggests that the answers to be found in political creeds are irrelevant to the needs of the individual; and second, to examine Crabbe's presentation of some of the problems facing the individual in his choice of the good life, and to discuss briefly what the poem reveals of Crabbe's own personal solution to these enduring questions.

As is the case with all Crabbe's poems, one must first take care to avoid confusing Crabbe's own comments with those of his characters. Tales of the Hall is particularly prone to this type of confusion since Crabbe has obviously written himself into many of the characters. The story of the growing friendship between the half-brothers George and Richard almost certainly had its source in the events of Crabbe's own life at this time. In December 1816, Crabbe arranged for his son John and his young wife to come and live with him at the rectory in Trowbridge.¹ In a letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter, Crabbe described John and his wife Anna in much the same way that he portrayed Richard and Matilda in Tales of the Hall: "My Son is an affectionate Husband and I think the young pair have never been parted for more than a few hours since they married."² Like George in Tales of the Hall, Crabbe hated to live alone, and for some years after the death of his wife

¹An ordained minister, John became Crabbe's curate.

²Letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter, March 26, 1819, in The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 230.

he considered remarrying. Crabbe wrote to Miss Charter: "My foolish heart at this Time and in spite of Reason and Experience, wants Kindness, Sympathy, Affection."³ Although Crabbe considered several candidates, and for a time it looked as though he might marry Miss Charlotte Ridout,⁴ in the end he decided against marriage at his age, and settled down comfortably with John and his wife.

From what is known of Crabbe's life, one can see that the elder brother, George, in Tales of the Hall resembles Crabbe closely. Yet biographical parallels can be misleading if not applied with care; both Richard, especially in the details of his youth by the seaside, and Jacques, in his religious beliefs, bear similarities to Crabbe. Moreover Crabbe was greatly impressed by Johnson's maxim: "Never fear putting the strongest and best things you can think of into the mouth of your speaker, whatever may be his condition."⁵ He often chose not one, but several characters to represent his own opinions. Usually many characters express ideas which are partially true, but none expresses the whole truth. From the rhetorical structure thereby created, Crabbe invited his readers to draw their own conclusions.

Crabbe introduces such a rhetorical structure at the beginning of Tales of the Hall when he creates what is almost a

³August 23, 1815. The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 103.

⁴See The Romance of an Elderly Poet, pp. 42-47.

⁵Miss Hoare told Crabbe's son that Johnson had given Crabbe this advice at their second meeting in London. See Life, Ch. iv, p. 100.

type of political allegory.⁶ George, the rich elder brother who has retired to Binning Hall, is described in Tory terminology; Richard, the poor relation, is given definite Whig sympathies. When Crabbe's son has stated that in later life Crabbe slowly abandoned his "popular or liberal opinions" as he imbibed "aristocratic and Tory leanings,"⁷ and when it is known that George's relation to his brother Richard is similar to that of Crabbe to his son John, one might naturally assume that George represents Crabbe's own position. Yet this is so only in part. Crabbe's handling of the political dialectic is of especial interest since he never allows the brothers merely to represent political ideas; rather the political ideas inform the two brothers, helping to describe and define their different personalities. It is particularly important to understand that Crabbe does not present the brothers' political opposition in order to side with one or the other. As will be seen presently, Crabbe introduces the subject of politics, not to champion a particular party, but to show that neither conservative nor liberal has any reason to believe that he is completely in the right.

At this period Tories were often called "Church and King"

⁶In Tale I of Tales, Crabbe employs a similar technique when he contrasts the Tory, Justice Bolt, with the Radical, Hammond.

⁷Life, Ch. vii, pp. 175-176.

men, their loyalties being to the establishment in both religious and secular matters.⁸ On religion George is definitely a Churchman, although by no means a fanatic:

GEORGE loved to think; but, as he late began
To muse on all the grander thoughts of man,
He took a solemn and a serious view
Of his religion, and he found it true;
Firmly, yet meekly, he his mind applied
To this great subject, and was satisfied
(I. 126-131).

George does not believe everything the rector preaches, but finding himself in agreement with the fundamentals, he accepts the Established Church as the institution most closely approximating the truth:

The church he view'd as liberal minds will view,
And there he fix'd his principles and pew
(I. 138-139).

In politics as in religion George finds that the existing institutions are best. He dislikes the thought of government by the majority, and believes that "the public good" must be in "private care." He will have nothing to do with Jacobins or any of the workers' movements which were demanding a revolution in the government of England:

George loved the cause of freedom, but reproved
All who with wild and boyish ardour loved:
Those who believed they never could be free,
Except when fighting for their liberty;
Who by their very clamour and complaint
Invite coercion or enforce restraint.
He thought a trust so great, so good a cause,
Was only to be kept by guarding laws;
For, public blessings firmly to secure,

⁸ Johnson gives the following definition in his Dictionary: "Tory. (A cant term, derived, I suppose, from an Irish word signifying a savage.) One who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the church of England, opposed to a whig."

We must a lessening of the good endure
(I. 146-155).

While pointing out that George believes his conservatism to be reasonable, not blind and reactionary, Crabbe also pokes fun at George's desire to be thought a liberal conservative. After describing George's attitude to the political needs of the nation, Crabbe says:

The constitution was the ark that he
Join'd to support with zeal and sanctity;
Nor would expose it, as th' accursed son
His father's weakness, to be gazed upon
(I. 168-171).

The verb "expose" carries a double meaning. Knowing that the constitution has weak points, George refuses to bring it into the open where its exposure would allow people to see these weaknesses. It is indeed a weak constitution that cannot bear discussion. This passage, like the previous one in which George fixed his "principles and pew," contains a good deal of irony. The irony should alert the reader that George is by no means entirely Crabbe's mouthpiece.

Richard, as Jeffrey notes, is in many ways the opposite, or rather the complement, of George, being "more open, social and talkative -- a happy husband and father, with a tendency to Whiggism, and some notion of reform."⁹ In religion Richard is not altogether a sectarian, but he does have a strong mixture of

⁹The Edinburgh Review, XXXII (1819), 126.

sectarian views:

By nature generous, open, daring, free,
 The vice he hated was hypocrisy.
 Religious notions, in her latter years,
 His mother gave, admonish'd by her fears;
 To these he added, as he chanced to read
 A pious work or learn a christian creed.
 He heard the preacher by the highway side,
 The church's teacher, and the meeting's guide;
 And, mixing all their matters in his brain,
 Distill'd a something he could ill explain;
 But still it served him for his daily use,
 And kept his lively passions from abuse;
 For he believed, and held in reverence high,
 The truth so dear to man -- "not all shall die"
 (I. 220-233).

It is important not to let Crabbe's own position as a vicar of the Church of England blinker one's response to his portrayal of Richard. Crabbe sympathetically presents Richard's religious and political beliefs. Unlike his earlier poems, Tales of the Hall contains no sarcastic references to the enthusiasm of Dissenters.¹⁰

In politics, indeed in all public affairs, Richard hates the idea of arbitrary authority. Naturally enough Jeffrey and others of his time saw him as a Whig:

He spake of freedom as a nation's cause,
 And loved, like George, our liberty and laws;
 But had more youthful ardour to be free,
 And stronger fears for injured liberty.
 With him, on various questions that arose,
 The monarch's servants were the people's foes;
 And, though he fought with all a Briton's zeal,
 He felt for France as Freedom's children feel;

¹⁰This change of opinion about the Dissenters can be seen in the opinions he expressed in his new church at Trowbridge. At Muston he had preached against the Dissenters; at Trowbridge, he accepted them warmly. See Life, Ch. ix, pp. 221-222.

Went far with her in what she thought reform,
 And hail'd the revolutionary storm;
 Yet would not here, where there was least to win,
 And most to lose, the doubtful work begin;
 But look'd on change with some religious fear,
 And cried, with filial dread, "Ah! come not here"
 (I. 240-253).

At the beginning of this passage Richard's dislike of the king's power and his zeal for revolutionary France make him appear almost a Radical. At the end of the passage however, his radicalism is given a sudden twist when unexpectedly he refuses to apply his radical principles to England. Jeffrey mentioned that Richard had "some notion of reform," and although the general picture of Richard's optimism supports this idea, Crabbe has actually shown Richard to fear reform in England almost as much as does George -- for he "look'd on change with some religious fear." Richard's temperamental love of freedom has misled Jeffrey into thinking Richard must be an advocate for reform. While Richard is certainly the humane sort of person to whom ideas for reform would appeal, Crabbe nowhere suggests that Richard has ever advocated reform. Richard appears to be a gentleman's idea of a "decent" democrat.

Richard's emphasis upon opposition to the "monarch's servants" recalls the reforming idiom of the 1780's rather than that of the first decades of the nineteenth century. Richard seems to be thinking of Dunning's famous resolution carried in committee in the House of Commons, "that the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished."¹¹

¹¹April 6, 1780.

In Book XXII Crabbe again uses this reforming idiom of the 1780's to characterize the difference between a Whig and a Tory squire (XXII. 164-167). Certainly in 1819 the power of the monarch was no longer the reformers' principal objection. Moreover Richard's zeal for the early years of the French revolution recalls that Crabbe also "hailed the beginning of the French Revolution,"¹² and suggests that Crabbe is thinking of a late eighteenth rather than an early nineteenth century setting for the poem.

Although Crabbe obviously meant George and Richard, with their differences in religion and politics, to represent opposing philosophies of life, he constantly qualifies their beliefs so that serious arguments do not arise. Originally however Crabbe had intended the differences between the two brothers to be much greater than they now appear. This can be seen especially in Book IV during the incident when George and Richard are out walking. On hearing the sound of a gun, Richard comments, "That gun itself, that murders all this peace, / Adds to the charm, because it soon must cease" (IV. 76-77). In Crabbe's final version of the poem George replies with an equally innocuous comment on the pleasures of his model farm, but Crabbe's son notes that in the original MS, Richard's comment on the gun had provoked George to a vehement condemnation of poachers:

¹²Life, Ch. vii, p. 174.

"That gun itself, that breaks upon the ear,
Has something suited to the dying year."
"The dying partridge!" cried, with much disdain,
Th' offended 'Squire -- "Our laws are made in vain:
The country, Richard, would not be amiss,
But for these plagues, and villanies like this."¹³

Possibly Crabbe decided to omit George's diatribe against poachers as being out of keeping with the theme of "Smugglers and Poachers." Had the passage been retained, George would appear reactionary, and readers would have drawn a comparison between "th' offended 'Squire" and the squire of "Smugglers and Poachers" who set the lives of partridges above the lives of men.

An even more important alteration of this type occurs a few lines further on. At line 88 in the published version, George asks Richard to observe his flock of sheep, and to note the improvements in breeding. Richard does so, and then candidly asks whether such agricultural interests actually give pleasure. George replies honestly that agricultural improvements are worthwhile, but do not bring him much joy. And here the discussion ends. However in the original MS, the passage is quite different. When Richard first asks the question, George pretends that his flock gives him great satisfaction. Only when Richard repeats his question does George admit to being uninterested in sheep. George then melodramatically asks Richard what can hold man's interest. Richard replies:

"Suppose," said he, "we look about the green,
In yonder cots some objects may be seen,
T' excite our pity, or relieve our spleen."¹⁴

¹³Poems by George Crabbe, "Variants Section," II, 487-488.

¹⁴Poems by George Crabbe, "Variants Section," II, 488.

Richard is here obviously suggesting that philanthropy will give George an interest. Surprisingly enough this suggestion angers George, and an argument ensues:

"Oh! they are thieves and blockheads," George replied,
"Unjust, ungrateful, and unsatisfied;

To grasp at all, their study, thought, and care,
All would be thieves and plunderers, if they dare;

His envious nature not a clown conceals,
But bluntly shows the insolence he feels."

"And whence," said Richard, "should the vice proceed,
But from their want of knowledge, and their need?

Let them know more, or let them better feel,
And I'll engage they'll neither threat nor steal."

"Brother," said George, "your pity makes you blind
To all that's vile and odious in mankind;

'Tis true your notions may appear divine,
But for their justice -- let us go and dine."¹⁵

Richard's question has spurred George on to show some of his true Tory colours. When he denounces the poor as thieves, George appears in a most unsympathetic light. They are all "thieves and blockheads" he says. What particularly angers him is that the poor refuse to show proper respect and gratitude when given charity.

Thus George's rather theoretical and melodramatic question about the tragic fate of man soon becomes a bitter discussion of practicalities, in which Richard gives his brother some excellent projects to "fix the mind of man." Richard obviously believes that one can find completely self-justifying projects to better social conditions. George follows much more in the tradition of Samuel Johnson in his belief in the vanity of all human wishes. That Crabbe deleted this incident in which genuine disagreement occurs between the brothers is significant. The disagreement is

¹⁵ Poems by George Crabbe, "Variants Section," II, 488.

fundamental, resulting from two basically different conceptions of the social order. Although most modern readers would consider Richard correct in believing that the poor would improve once they were given better opportunities, in 1819 probably many of Crabbe's readers would have found Richard's ideas to be mere Godwinian perfectionism.¹⁶ There is no way of knowing why Crabbe decided to soften George's extremist Tory beliefs, but since the poem develops the theme that political differences are usually insignificant amongst men of good will, Crabbe may well have found that his original conception of George did not permit the type of reconciliation he wanted to portray. In the published version George is presented as a benevolent squire, always willing to aid the deserving.

Crabbe was probably influenced in his choice of the themes of moderation and toleration by what he saw of the intense and vituperative political battles of the early nineteenth century. The Quarterly Review and Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine had recently been formed expressly to counter the influence of the Whig policies of The Edinburgh Review. At this period even poets were often judged, not by the merit of their poetry, but by their political principles.

¹⁶ It is often difficult to be certain when irony is intended in discussions of social or political reform at this time. Arguments that a person of today would think conclusive reasons for effecting change were often used in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to show the impossibility of change. For instance Soame Jenyns opens his Thoughts on a Parliament Reform by saying, "The great object of a parliamentary reform I take to be this, to procure a parliament totally independent on the crown and its ministers; in which no member shall be intimidated by power, seduced by hopes, or corrupted by interest" But the modern reader is sadly mistaken if he thinks Soame Jenyns to be in favour of such a reform. 2nd ed. (London, 1784), pp. 1-2.

Certainly Crabbe himself believed that political creeds were only superficial, as the following letter indicates:

With respect to the parties themselves, Whig and Tory, I can but think, two dispassionate, sensible men, who have seen, read, and observed, will approximate in their sentiments more and more; and if they confer together, and argue, -- not to convince each other, but for pure information, and with a simple desire for the truth, -- the ultimate difference will be small indeed. The Tory, for instance, would allow that, but for the Revolution in this country, and the noble stand against the arbitrary steps of the house of Stuart, the kingdom would have been in danger of becoming what France once was; and the Whig must also grant, that there is at least an equal danger in an unsettled, undefined democracy; the ever-changing laws of a popular government. Every state is at times on the inclination to change: either the monarchical or the popular interest will predominate; and in the former case, I conceive, the well-meaning Tory will incline to Whiggism, -- in the latter, the honest Whig will take the part of declining monarchy.¹⁷

Crabbe's belief that party differences usually have little basis in fact is strikingly brought out in a fragment entitled "The Squire."¹⁸ In this short sketch Crabbe has great fun in showing how a man can be both Whig and Tory, depending upon which of his interests are touched. In his role of head of the house or magistrate, the squire is a Tory. He demands that the lower classes respect the established order, which includes paying respect to himself, since he is a magistrate:

¹⁷Crabbe's son quotes the letter in Life, Ch. vii, p. 178. But he does not say to whom the letter was written nor does he give its date.

¹⁸MS in the John Murray Collection. This fragment, which Crabbe never published, appears to be part of an unfinished tale. The date is uncertain, but is probably after 1810. A slightly different version of the first sixteen lines was published by Ward under the title "Contentment," Poems by George Crabbe, III, 493.

Placed in his Magesterial Chair his Look
 Declared the Tory Justice eer he spoke
 And he would rail at all who dared encroach
 On Rights Established, Rogues who snare & poach
 He called them Rascal-Traytors, Scoundrels, Knaves
 And had no pity on th assuming Slaves
 Yet was he kind when properly addressed
 And all the Tory-Dignity confessed.¹⁹

However when away from the servants or in situations where he does not have to set a good example to the lower orders, the squire shows himself to be strongly critical of the crown and administration:

But with his Equals & his Friends around
 The Tory Pride in Rebel Port was drowned
 Then he discoursed of Land Tax & Excise
 Till the strong Spirit of the Whig would rise
 Taxes like Mice was [sic] numberless of late
 And nibbling round would eat up his Estate
 On Horse, Dog, Carriage, All that we could name
 Taxes like Murrain or like Mildew came
 Was there no Patriot from the Country sent
 Who would such Evils strongly represent?
 None who to ministerial Slaves would shew
 What saving Care they to their Country Owe
 None who the Ills that We so long endure
 Will call on our presiding Lords to cure²⁰

In matters relating to those in the lower orders, the squire firmly believes in the law of subordination. Yet when his own affairs are touched, he finds that he dislikes being ruled from London, and so allies himself with the Country Gentlemen in opposition to Westminster.²¹ Politics then is often no more than an expedient to serve one's own interests. Crabbe sees in the squire two opposing principles -- the desire for freedom and the desire to

¹⁹See Appendix 2, p. 675, lines 31-38.

²⁰See Appendix 2, p. 676, lines 43-56.

²¹These were the Country Gentlemen who rallied around Pitt when he requested support for solid government without the corruption of the court.

retain authority:

Thus as his State or money touched his Mind
He to the Tories or the Whigs inclined
Would now of Freedom & his Blissings [sic] sing²²
And now devoutly pray God Save the King.

Squire George in Tales of the Hall knows himself much better than this squire of the fragment, but George's political ideas are also formed as much from unconscious temperamental and social causes as they are from reasons of public utility.

The importance of politics in Tales of the Hall is that the opposites created are not permanent but permit resolution. In Book X, for instance, Jacques and Maria find for a time that their happiness is threatened by their parents' political differences. Jacques' father is a Whig who hates the Tory principles of his neighbour:

Oft would my father cry, "that tory-knave,
That villain-placeman, would the land enslave."
Not that his neighbour had indeed a place,
But would accept one -- that was his disgrace
(X. 96-99).

In turn, the Tory hates the Whig principles which he believes will bring revolution and anarchy to Britain:

Who, in his turn, was sure my father plann'd
To revolutionize his native land.
He dared the most destructive things advance,
And even pray'd for liberty to France;
Had still good hope that Heaven would grant his prayer,
That he might see a revolution there
(X. 100-105).

In the earlier section where Crabbe employed politics to characterize George and Richard, he treated politics seriously. Although George

²²See Appendix 2, p. 676, lines 57-60.

and Richard may at times think they hold their political opinions for better reasons than they actually do, the brothers believe sincerely (in so far as they are able) in the truth of their philosophies. However in Book X, Crabbe depicts the two squires as violent party men, and as such, almost wilfully blind to reason. Their extreme politics verge on the irrational.

In Jacques, Crabbe presents his own view about such extreme party politics. Jacques cares little for his father's political quarrel, and believes that it has no real importance except as a means of feeding an already existing feud. He maintains that such quarrels are for old men; young people are interested in human relationships: "Nor can they feel men's quarrels or their cares, / Of whig or tory, partridges or hares" (X. 132-133). This Pope-like ironic juxtaposition of the phrase "whig or tory" with that of "partridges or hares," establishes Crabbe's opinion that politics, as it was to be found in the rival squires, is of no real importance. Love, or human relationships should claim first priority.

In this short sketch of violent party politics in Book X, one can see that Crabbe's dismissal of politics as being unimportant does not originate from a mere prejudice against politics, but from the conviction that men often hold their most deeply felt and influential beliefs for reasons entirely different from those they give. As is well known, political opinions are often deeply rooted in emotional responses. Crabbe points out that the differences of opinion on religion and politics between Richard and George result from their having lived different types of lives. Richard has

lived an adventurous life on the sea amongst men who naturally saw their enemy as the established order. George has spent his life in commerce; his is the natural caution of the business man. Crabbe indicates that even heredity has a part in forming a person's opinions. Richard and George, it will be recalled, are only half-brothers. When George's father died his mother married an Irishman. Throughout the poem Crabbe alludes to Richard's wild Irish blood as a possible reason for his spontaneous compassion for his fellow man.

As has been seen in "The Parish Register" and The Borough, Crabbe believed that habit played as important a role as reason in forming men's beliefs in politics and religion. George thinks he has superior reasons for choosing one church over another: "He saw -- he thought he saw -- how weakness, pride, / And habit, draw seceding crowds aside" (I. 140-141). The emphasis however lies on the phrase "he thought he saw." George may believe he is uninfluenced by habits in his choice of religion, but the reader easily sees that his temperament as much as his reason influenced his choice. In a letter to a friend, Crabbe commented that people often gave their assent to religious principles for causes "independent of any merit of their own."²³

Since Crabbe toned down the quarrel between George and Richard, so that they are both moderates in their party politics, his political spectrum is fairly narrow. Although Richard's politics could be described generally as whiggish, they contain

²³Life, Ch. ix, pp. 221-222, n. 1.

nothing radical. However as Crabbe wished to show that neither conservative nor liberal entirely represented the best interests of the nation, it would be helpful to know his opinion of the Radicals. Although Crabbe does not introduce any principal character who is a Radical, he does introduce the topic of radicalism. The reference occurs, significantly enough, in the story of William Bailey. William is a young farm worker in love with Frances. Hard working and honest, William (somewhat like Seth in Adam Bede) finds himself a little above the average farm hand because of his interest in books. Not only can William read, he can write. More important still, he is self-taught. The crux of the story occurs when Frances is invited by a spinster aunt to spend some days at a great hall where she is house-keeper. While staying at the hall, Frances is seduced and taken away by the Baron's son. Heartbroken at the news, William leaves his farm to wander round the country. Proud, self-taught, and a member of the lower class, William seems the logical person to turn Radical.

During his wanderings William meets many of the poor who teach him something of their problems: "And from the sick, the poor, the halt, the blind, / He learn'd the sorrows of his suffering kind" (XIX. 529-530). He meets many knaves and rogues, but also some Radicals who, dissatisfied with their lot in life, blame the unjust state of society for their miserable existence:

There were who spoke in terms of high disdain
Of 1816. Of their contending against power in vain;
Suffering from tyranny of law long borne;
And life's best spirits in contentions worn.

Happy in this, th' oppressors soon will die,
 Each with the vex'd and suffering man to lie --
 And thus consoled exclaim, "And is not sorrow dry?"
 (XIX. 546-552)

The passage is slightly ambiguous, since the reader is unsure whether or not Crabbe agrees that these people are tyrannized by the law. But even if Crabbe believed that these Radicals were oppressed, the humour implicit in the last line -- "And is not sorrow dry?" -- dissolves the social criticism in irony. In an instant the dissatisfied vagrants are reduced from serious Radicals to bums and cadgers.

William listens sympathetically to the oppressed, but he rejects any suggestion that violence would help to change the social order. Any talk of revolutionary violence is labelled vice:

But vice offended: when he met with those
 Who could a deed of violence propose,
 And cry, "Should they what we desire possess?
 Should they deprive us, and their laws oppress?"
 William would answer, "Ours is not redress." --
 "Would you oppression, then, for ever feel?" --
 "'Tis not my choice; but yet I must not steal." --
 "So, first they cheat us, and then make their laws
 To guard their treasures and to back their cause:
 What call you then, my friend, the rights of man?" --
 "To get his bread," said William, "if he can;
 And if he cannot, he must then depend
 Upon a Being he may make his friend." --
 "Make!" they replied; and conference had end
 (XIX. 553-566).

One should recall that during the years 1812-1819 when Crabbe was writing Tales of the Hall, England experienced two serious riots: the Luddite uprisings of 1812-1813, and the East Anglia bread riots of 1816. When the Radicals propose that William should join them in violent protest, their offer is serious and highly dangerous.

The way in which William brusquely dismisses suggestions of violence indicates that Crabbe also had little sympathy with rioters and incendiaries.

Clearly it is somewhat unfair to attempt to draw conclusions about Crabbe's opinions of radicalism from these few statements. Yet one can see that even though Crabbe does not give the Radicals a good hearing, he does not reject and abuse them as did the Tory periodicals of the time. William, it is true, refuses to join them. But then, they also refuse to join William. The argument comes to a head over the basic issue of the rights of man.²⁴ When William contends that the unemployed have no other recourse but to pray to God for help, the Radicals refuse to listen. A snort of defiance is all William receives when he tells them to turn to God. The argument ends with William's orthodox but cruel observation that God may not necessarily be interested in helping the poor.

The curious feature of this passage is that the dialogue between William and the Radicals by no means settles any questions. The reader is left with the feeling that the Radicals deserve a better answer than William was able to give. This is not to claim that Crabbe supports the Radicals' call to violence, for obviously he does not; but on the other hand, the manner of presentation of the incident leaves William's answer of passive obedience wholly

²⁴Crabbe is making an obvious reference to Tom Paine's Rights of Man (1791), the influence of which can hardly be overestimated at this period. See E.P. Thompson The Making of the English Working Class, pp. 87-114.

inadequate.²⁵ However the main point is not whether Crabbe agreed that the Radicals were oppressed, but that he reveals the Radicals do not understand their own motives for advocating violence. Crabbe shows that the Radicals, like George and Richard, do not understand the reasons why they hold their beliefs.

Yet Tales of the Hall is clearly the work of a poet who is both elderly and cautiously conservative. Although one can see that Crabbe is attempting to show that conflict need not arise between the conservative and the liberal, to a certain extent he prejudges the case by removing almost all the grounds of disagreement. As has been remarked, Richard's "liberal" opinions are remarkably close to George's conservative ones. Richard never suggests that social distinctions should be levelled; he accepts that individuals of the lower orders should respect those in the higher:

The younger man his gentle host obey'd,
For some respect, though not required, was paid;
Perhaps with all that independent pride
Their different states would to the memory glide
(VI. 19-22).

When Martha in Book XI describes the chapel of the Methodists she singles out for contempt one of the features of Methodism which least appealed to the gentry of the Church of England -- the chapel

²⁵That Crabbe refused to condemn the Radicals can be seen again in Tale I of Tales where he presents the Radical Hammond who called "loudly for reform" and "hail'd the prospect of the storm" (Tales I. 237-238). Crabbe presents Hammond as a salutary example to the reactionary Justice Bolt who believes England's government is perfect and that her church leaves nothing "to mend or to restore" (Tales I. 405). While Crabbe does not agree with the Radicals in their call to revolution, he is prepared to acknowledge that they serve a purpose in counteracting the much more powerful forces of reaction.

is an "all-equalizing place" (XI. 532).²⁶ In Book XIII, George vents his disapproval of the trader who, when he becomes rich:

Neglects his former smile, his humble bow,
And, conscious of his hoarded wealth, assumes
New airs, nor thinks how odious he becomes
(XIII. 67-69).

George of course speaks these lines, not Crabbe. Yet no one in the poem ever advances views to contradict George, and there is no reason to suspect that Crabbe disagreed with George on these points.

The picture of Crabbe revealed to us by Tales of the Hall -- cautious and conservative, yet remarkably free of the usual Tory fears of change and revolution -- agrees well with the little that is known of Crabbe's own political allegiances. Indeed the facts available tell us little more about Crabbe's beliefs than does the internal evidence of Tales of the Hall. Crabbe seems to have seldom discussed politics. Moreover his extant statements show that he does not fit easily into any of the well-known categories. Since Crabbe's son has mentioned that Crabbe was not

²⁶R.W. Harris comments that Methodism failed to make much impression on the upper classes because it "smacked of impertinence and indiscipline It was impossible to expect that the governing classes would accept the democratic aspects of Wesley's movement." Romanticism and the Social Order 1780-1830 (London, 1969), p. 127. John Moore gives an illuminating description of the upper classes' fear of the levelling influence of the Methodists: "Her ladyship once carried me, for a frolic, to hear a methodist-preacher: unluckily, the man preached about the rich man and Lazarus, which terrified her to such a degree, that she was carried out in violent hysterics: and though, formerly, she made it a rule to go to church once every season, to show a good example to the ignorant vulgar, yet, after that accident, she never ventured to hear any preacher whatever, except the curate of Willow-Bank, on whose discretion she can rely, because his only hope of preferment is in her ladyship." Mordaunt, ed. W.L. Renwick (London, 1965), p. 270 (Letter 49).

particularly interested in politics, it might seem that the question is hardly worth pursuing. But one should recall that Crabbe had three votes,²⁷ and was often called upon to use them. Presumably Crabbe was forced to make some political decisions. Crabbe's son, it will be recalled, felt that Crabbe lost his early liberal opinions and became more of a Tory in his old age.²⁸ Certainly several of Crabbe's acquaintances, Lockhart included, believed that Crabbe was a strong Tory. In a letter to John Wilson Croker of January 26, 1835, suggesting that Crabbe's son should be given some sort of government place, Lockhart warned Croker that Crabbe's son "unlike his father," was "a bit of a Whig."²⁹ Yet other evidence is not so clear. Although Crabbe seconded Croker's nomination at an election in Aldborough in 1826, this seems to have been a spur of the moment action. Croker asked him as a friend to do so, and Crabbe agreed "in very few words."³⁰ In 1816 at a Trowbridge election, however, Crabbe supported John Benett of Pyt House, a Whig.

Although Crabbe may have become temperamentally conservative as he grew older, he never rejected attempts to introduce democratic measures. Two years before publication of Tales of the Hall, in the midst of reform propaganda and the East Anglia bread riots,

²⁷For Trowbridge, Aldborough and the University of Cambridge. See Huchon, p. 454, n. 2.

²⁸Life, Ch. vii, pp. 175-176.

²⁹Letter from Lockhart to John Wilson Croker, January 26, 1835. Quoted from Myron F. Brightfield, John Wilson Croker (London, 1940), p. 265, n. 118.

³⁰Letter to his son George, June 28, 1826. Quoted from Huchon, p. 455, n. 2. Significantly enough the election was unopposed.

Crabbe expressed in a letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter his belief in the country's general sanity:

You ask my opinion of the Times. I cannot give a satisfactory one but I dread no Insurrections, no Hunts, no Cobbetts; and I hope cheerfully, and I have comfort in the Benevolence and morality of the country in general.³¹

Crabbe seems to have kept himself detached not only from political parties but from political questions as well. As late as 1831 he was unable to make up his mind about the greatest issue of the day, parliamentary reform. He wrote to his son:

In Government, in Religion[,] In many things that intimately relate to Mans Happiness, Man is not able to decide what is to be wished or preferred: I[t?] would be most distressing to me to be called upon to decide on the Questions of Church Property, Parliamentary Reform, or what Kind of Government is best suited to the Welfare etc. of this Country; but I may rest contented: these Matters will not be determined in my Time -- nor in Yours -- at least so I think but they may be agitated at least so I -- fear?³²

Crabbe's fears of agitation were not without grounds; while staying with his friends the Hoares at Clifton in October 1831, he witnessed the Bristol riots.³³

However in a curiously detached, and far-sighted manner, he saw clearly that the actual contents of the Reform Bill would not be cause for great jubilation or alarm to either party: "With some it is ruin; with others it is renovation; neither my hopes

³¹Letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter, February 11, 1817, in The Romance of an Elderly Poet, pp. 154-155.

³²Letter to his son George, February 4, 1831, in F.M. Link ed., "Three Crabbe Letters," ELN, II (1965), 206.

³³Life, Ch. x, pp. 311-313.

or fears are very strong; the lower class of our brethren can be but little affected by the bill, whatever they may be by the effects of it, and of those effects who has foresight enough to determine?"³⁴ The historian E.L. Woodward has confirmed Crabbe's summary of the Bill in his statement that neither Whigs nor Tories had any understanding "that the greatest changes resulting from the reform bill would take place outside parliament and in the sphere of administration."³⁵

Unlike Tories such as Croker, Crabbe never seems to have been frightened by the idea of a reformed parliament.³⁶

In October 1831, two weeks after the House of Lords had thrown the country into consternation by rejecting the second Bill,³⁷ Crabbe wrote cheerfully to his son that he felt the Whig ministers would manage to reconcile the opposition to the reforms:

I believe there is a fund of good sense as well as moral feeling in the people of this country; and if ministers proceed steadily, give up some points, and be firm in essentials, there will be a union of sentiment on this great subject of reform by and by; at least, the good and well-meaning will drop their minor differences and be united.³⁸

³⁴Letter to his son George, n.d. Quoted from Huchon, p. 456.

³⁵The Age of Reform 1815-1870, in the Oxford History of England series (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1938), p. 77.

³⁶Compare Croker's statement in a letter of December 1831 to Lord Hertford: "I find that those who some months ago derided my alarms are now at least as much frightened as I am." See The Croker Papers, ed. Louis Jennings (London, 1884), II, 140.

³⁷The second Bill had passed the Commons in September 1831, after a session of three months; it was defeated in the House of Lords on October 8, 1831, after a debate of five days. The rejection of the Bill precipitated riots in Nottingham, Derby and Bristol.

³⁸Letter to his son George, October 24, 1831. Life, Ch. x, pp. 310-311.

Staunch Tories such as Lockhart and Croker would have been sadly disillusioned in their belief in Crabbe's toryism had they known of his easy acceptance of the Reform Bill.

Huchon has deduced from this last letter that Crabbe was both in favour of the Reform Bill and that he remained a "Liberal up to his last moments."³⁹ However when Crabbe wrote his letter of October 24th, the mood of the people was dangerous; meetings supporting the government were taking place throughout the country. It was clear to all that the Bill had the genuine support of most of the country, and that continued conflict was likely to produce civil war. The evidence would suggest that Crabbe had no strong opinions on the subject of parliamentary reform,⁴⁰ but once the passage of the Bill became inevitable, he wished to see compromise amongst right-thinking politicians so that Earl Grey would be assured of a majority in the House of Lords.

Lockhart's belief that Crabbe's son was more of a Radical than Crabbe himself is probably true. In one of Crabbe's MS sermons in the John Murray archive, someone has changed in pencil Crabbe's original sentiments:

³⁹Huchon, p. 456.

⁴⁰Astonishingly enough, once Crabbe made up his mind to support a particular person in politics, nothing would dissuade him. Bowles tells how "a riotous, tumultuous, and most appalling mob" besieged Crabbe's house when they learned he was planning to give his vote to an unpopular candidate: "In the face of the furious assemblage, he came out calmly, told them they might kill him if they chose, but, whilst alive, nothing should prevent his giving a vote at the election, according to his promise and principles, and set off, undisturbed and unhurt, to vote for Mr. Benett." Quoted from Life, Ch. ix, pp. 220-221.

They submit and bear as Christians whatsoever is necessarily connected with that State of Life to which it has pleased God to call them. They are as the Disciples of their Saviour Humble in Station, humble in Heart, Mind. And yet with this Humility, they know that with the greatest & most wealthy of their Fellow Sinners, they shall stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ

In the first sentence the words "submit and" have been deleted.

The entire second sentence has been deleted and replaced by: ^{then}

Knowing that Religion does not forbid them bettering that State could they do so by Lawful Means.⁴¹

What seems to have happened here is that when Crabbe's son decided to use the sermon, he introduced changes to make it agreeable to his own democratic feelings.⁴² Crabbe's sermons, it may be noted, were always orthodox in their teaching of humility.

Crabbe however seems to defy the attempts of critics to pigeon-hole his beliefs. While in London in 1818, he witnessed the hotly contested Westminster election in which the Tory Sir Murray Maxwell was challenged by the Radical Sir Francis Burdett and the liberal reformer Sir Samuel Romilly. Crabbe commented:

⁴¹MS sermon on "Epistle to the Hebrews" 2nd and 3rd Verse, in the John Murray Collection. Several other sermons contain similar emendations.

⁴²Crabbe had the practice of noting the date and place of every time he preached his sermons. The first entry is for February 22, 1829, Trowbridge, and the last is April 21, 1833, preached at Hadescoe Toft. As Crabbe died February 3, 1832, it seems fairly clear that his son George took over the sermons. I suggest that it was George and not John who used Crabbe's sermons after his death because the sermons carry the note that they were preached at Pucklechurch, George's vicarage until 1834.

⁴³Letter to his son George, Jan 7, 1837. (Crabbe's Works, London, p. 455).

⁴⁴MS. Sermon on Matthew 23:23, V (July 1819), 472.

to only I was in Covent Garden during most part of the Contest, but was perfectly quiet and walked through the great Collection of people as calmly and undisturbed as if they had known how insignificant and indifferent I was; yet not so entirely, I had a secret wish or two for my Friend Sir Sam: Romilly who does me the Honour of both saying and doing very kind Things.⁴³

Crabbe seems to have been one of those independent "Country Gentlemen" who gave their allegiances to the candidate rather than the party. In a letter of 1827 he remarked that he "felt considerable respect" for both sides, and wished to see time and good feeling soften "the spirit of animosity that now reigns among them."⁴⁴ In both his poetry and his personal life, Crabbe advocated conciliation; political differences, he felt, were more often a matter of emotion than of reasoned conviction.

II

John Wilson of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine has observed with great insight that in all Crabbe's poetry "we see a constant display of the passions as they are excited and exacerbated by the customs, and laws, and institutions of society."⁴⁵ While this statement is an excellent description of the early poems, it applies

⁴³The Romance of an Elderly Poet, pp. 214-215.

⁴⁴Letter to his son George, May 7, 1827. Quoted from Huchon, p. 455.

⁴⁵Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, V (July 1819), 472.

to only some of the tales of Tales of the Hall. In both "Smugglers and Poachers" and "Ruth" social events play an important role, but the only other story in which characters are seriously involved with social issues is Book XIX, "William Bailey." Moreover in this tale Crabbe's emphasis is on the "passions" as they are excited by "customs" so that his criticism has a personal rather than a social orientation. Yet in the behaviour of the various characters of "William Bailey," the story forms a model of the English social system in which the reader can see the injustice of the class system and the bad effects of paternal benevolence.

"William Bailey" provides an excellent example of Crabbe in both his roles as social critic: first pointing out the dangers of social inequality, and then showing how individuals can learn to adapt to social conditions. Through his particularized portrait of the spinster aunt, Crabbe reveals the general dangers which result from a complacent acceptance of the established order. This spinster aunt, the head housekeeper for the Baron's family, has been with the family for such a long time that she feels herself a part of the establishment. She is a devoted admirer of her master's efficient household where all the servants have their correct places and everyone receives his due reward:

Now that good dame had in the castle dwelt
So long that she for all its people felt;
She kept her sundry keys, and ruled o'er all,
Female and male, domestics in the hall;
By her lord trusted, worthy of her trust;
Proud but obedient, bountiful but just.

She praised her lucky stars, that in her place
She never found neglect, nor felt disgrace;

To do her duty was her soul's delight,
 This her inferiors would to theirs excite,
 This her superiors notice and requite;
 To either class she gave the praises due,
 And still more grateful as more favour'd grew.
 Her lord and lady were of peerless worth,
 In power unmatched, in glory and in birth;
 And such the virtue of the noble race,
 It reach'd the meanest servant in the place.
 All, from the chief attendant on my lord
 To the groom's helper, had her civil word;
 From Miss Montregor, who the ladies taught,
 To the rude lad who in the garden wrought;
 From the first favourite to the meanest drudge,
 Were no such women, heaven should be her judge;
 Whatever stains were theirs, let them reside
 In that pure place, and they were mundified;
 The sun of favour on their vileness shone,
 And all their faults like morning mists were gone
 (XIX. 234-260).

In a military-minded way, the spinster has so fallen in love with the efficiency of the household that she is incapable of seeing anything but superficial external appearances. Because she has a good position, and the household flourishes, the aunt believes that everyone in the establishment is perfect.

However Crabbe submits the Lord's family to a test when the aunt invites her niece Fanny, a village beauty, to visit her at the hall. The real relationship between rich and poor is now revealed. Fanny's beauty catches the eye of the Baron's son, and he seduces her into running away with him for a gay adventure. Crabbe points out that the aunt, had she not been blinded by her false picture of the virtue of the Lord's family, could have seen Fanny's danger in time to warn her. The social ramifications are fully revealed when Crabbe introduces Fanny's father who attempts

to gain satisfaction from the Baron's family. A bold yeoman who does not find the Lord's position awesome, Fanny's father is righteously angry:

Moved by his grief, the father sought the place,
Ask'd for his girl, and talk'd of her disgrace;
Spoke of the villain, on whose cursed head
He pray'd that vengeance might be amply shed
(XIX. 398-401).

Even though he presents his sister with the facts, she still refuses to admit the Lord's son capable of such a vile deed. She would rather ignore the incident than criticize the Baron's perfect establishment. She exclaims:

The Lord be good! and O! the pains that come
In limb and body -- Brother, get you home!
Your voice runs through me -- every angry word,
If he should hear it, would offend my lord
(XIX. 413-416).

The pun on the word "lord" serves to underline Crabbe's point that the spinster aunt has substituted genuine moral feelings for unthinking obedience to a system. Like many apologists for the class system she has equated God's order with the existing order.⁴⁶

Crabbe's portrayal of the meeting between the Baron and Fanny's father demonstrates that the poor had little means of redress from the wealthy. The scene is carefully presented to bring out the Baron's belief that he is a being of superior order

⁴⁶ Soame Jenyns is an excellent example. He remarked: "Superior beings may probably form to themselves, or receive from their Creator, government without tyranny or corruption, and religions without delusions or absurdities; but man cannot; God indeed may remove him into so exalted a society; but whilst he continues to be man, he must be subject to innumerable evils; amongst which those I call political and religious are far from being the least." Letter V of A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil, in The Works of Soame Jenyns, II, pp. 87-88.

who need not account for his actions:

My lord appear'd, perhaps by pity moved,
And kindly said he no such things approved;
Nay, he was angry with the foolish boy,
Who might his pleasures at his ease enjoy;
The thing was wrong -- he hoped the farm did well --
The angry father doom'd the farm to hell;
He then desired to see the villain-son,
Though my lord warn'd him such excess to shun;
Told him he pardon'd, though he blamed such rage,
And bade him think upon his state and age.
"Think! yes, my lord! but thinking drives me mad --
Give me my child! -- Where is she to be had?
I'm old and poor, but I with both can feel,
And so shall he that could a daughter steal!"

. . .

My lord replied -- "I'm sorry, from my soul!
But boys are boys, and there is no control." --
"So, for your great ones Justice slumbers, then!
If men are poor they must not feel as men --
Will your son marry?" -- "Marry!" said my lord,
"Your daughter? -- marry -- no, upon my word!"
"What then, our stations differ! -- but your son
Thought not of that -- his crime has made them one,
In guilt united -- She shall be his wife,
Or I th' avenger that will take his life!"

(XIX. 421-450)

The Baron's reaction to the accusation is one of pity. Since he accepts that the rich have the right to the daughters of the poor he does not feel that his son has been unjust.⁴⁷ For the Baron, the question of justice does not arise since Fanny is a member of the lower orders. The passage brings out clearly the injustices inherent in a situation where the rich act as if they are the masters of the poor. Paternalism and philanthropy may work well enough at times, but they are only second best. Justice is

⁴⁷ Once again Crabbe is pointing out that much of the distress in England is caused, not by the malevolence of the wealthy, but by their lack of real concern for the lower orders. As Vicesimus Knox commented, "Indifference is scarcely less culpable than corruption." The Spirit of Despotism, p. 9.

required; not pity.

The Baron, who believes that Fanny's father is wrong in daring to accuse him of injustice, advises him in the same way a clergyman might advise one of his flock. He believes himself to be in the same sort of relation to the poor as God is to man:

"Old man, I pity and forgive you; rest
In hope and comfort -- be not so distress'd;
Things that seem bad oft happen for the best.
The girl has done no more than thousands do,
Nor has the boy -- they laugh at me and you." --
"And this my vengeance -- curse him!" -- "Nay, forbear;
I spare your frenzy, in compassion spare"
(XIX. 451-457).

Fanny's father however does not receive justice. He can only pray that God will punish the Baron for his inhuman behaviour.

While presenting this scene between the Baron and Fanny's father with what appears to be high seriousness and a genuine concern for the lot of the poor, Crabbe deliberately refuses to draw the social conclusions implicit in the argument. One of the results, it will be recalled, is that William falls into the company of Radicals. In the work of a writer more conscious than Crabbe of his role as a social reformer, William would no doubt have succumbed to the temptation of avenging Frances through violent action. But Crabbe has William reject the Radicals. Indeed at the end of the poem Crabbe descends into purposive bathos when William meets Frances, now the virtuous keeper of a respectable public house.

William and Frances may be star-crossed lovers kept apart by the machinations of a wicked aristocracy, but their reunion as

in the epilogue. The Linkage of comments: "The instant
you enter my door 'tis as my land" (in prefatory poem to Letter XIX).

keepers of the Fleece is anything but exalted. The general image of the publican is of a person with no strong opinions of his own, but willing to listen and agree to the ideas of anyone who stops for a drink.⁴⁸ Certainly in this respect William and Frances are the ideal inn-keepers:

This pair, our host and hostess of the Fleece,
 Command some wealth, and smile at its increase;
 Saving and civil, cautious and discreet,
 All sects and parties in their mansion meet;
 There from their chapels teachers go to share
 The creature-comforts -- mockery grins not there;
 There meet the wardens at their annual feast,
 With annual pun -- "the parish must be fleeced";
 There traders find a parlour cleanly swept
 For their reception, and in order kept;
 And there the sons of labour, poor, but free,
 Sit and enjoy their hour of liberty
 (XIX. 716-727).

The attitude in this passage is almost Pickwickian. Misfortune, although acknowledged, never lasts, and is completely overshadowed by the presence of contentment.

The entire passage however is undercut with irony. The chapel preachers can frequent the Fleece without fear of mockery, because the owners have no wish to lose their trade, and thus do not "mock" the preachers' pretended abstinence. The use of the euphemism "creature-comforts" instead of the blunt word "ale" underlines the falseness of their position. The church wardens at their annual feast are probably only too correct in their pun. The closing line, with its rather pompous "sons of labour" contrasts oddly with the earlier description of the poor that William had met on the road. The workers are said to be "poor, but free"; only

⁴⁸In The Borough, the innkeeper comments: "The instant you enter my door you're my lord" (in prefatory poem to Letter XI).

in the following line do we see how free they are. Their hour in the inn is "their hour of liberty," the implication being that the remainder of the time they are captives.

The reviewer for The Monthly Review complained that the ending to "William Bailey" was gross:

The story of "William Bailey" is not, we think, so good in its moral effect as the great majority of Mr. Crabbe's productions. Here is a virtuous attachment broken off by the subsequent immodesty of the female; and, not contented with destroying of all the romance of love, by representing, after the lapse of years, the offending beauty as the fat landlady at "The Fleece," the poet makes the poor tame contented lover reunite himself to his worthless mistress, and actually become her deserving and happy husband! These may be ale-house politics: but certainly we see neither poetic justice nor manly feeling in the composition.⁴⁹

But the reviewer, like many of Crabbe's critics, seems to have completely missed the large element of humour in the story. At the beginning of the tale Crabbe portrays both Frances and William with a good deal of the comic about them. About William, Crabbe says, "His placid looks an easy mind confess'd; / His smile content, and seldom more, convey'd" (XIX. 132-133). At the end of the tale Crabbe seems to be saying that "ale-house politics" are suitable for ale-house keepers.⁵⁰ What misled the reviewer for The Monthly Review into feeling that Crabbe has given the tale a dubious moral ending was his failure to see how Crabbe very often combines the

⁴⁹The Monthly Review, XC (November 1819), 237.

⁵⁰Not only for ale-house keepers, but perhaps for the gentry as well. George would have married Rosabella in spite of her many liaisons had she been able to reform her life as had Frances.

serious and the humorous within a single story. Jeffrey noted that "William Bailey . . . is curiously and characteristically compounded of pathos and pleasantry, -- affecting incidents, and keen and sarcastic remarks."⁵¹ The point is that in a tale such as "William Bailey" the serious nature of the social criticism is unable to dominate the poem since it arises out of situations in which the characters themselves are not wholly serious. Crabbe's emphasis is not on the "customs, and laws, and institutions of society"⁵² but on the "passions" of individuals as they are "excited and exacerbated" by the social conditions.

Whereas in the first half of the tale Crabbe is the critic of social conditions who points out the injustices of the class system, in the second half he is the moralist who describes individuals reconciling themselves to these conditions and achieving happiness in spite of them. It is rare to find a poet such as Crabbe with enough vision, detachment and humour to create characters who -- although the victims of social injustice -- often possess the comic potential to triumph over their circumstances.

that: "The bliss of Man . . . / Is not to act or think beyond

See *Life*, Ch. vii, p. 146.

⁵¹The *Edinburgh Review*, XXXII (1819), 145.

⁵²Wilson's comment. See above, p. 573.

III

At the beginning of this chapter I noted that in Tales of the Hall Crabbe was attempting to show the qualities individuals required in order to adapt to and overcome the difficulties inherent in an imperfect society. Whereas in his earlier poems Crabbe had devoted his passion for the "science of the human mind"⁵³ to revealing his characters' mistaken beliefs, in Tales of the Hall he attempts to show the possibility, in particular with relation to George and Richard, of reaching a positive philosophy. Since the values of Crabbe's personal philosophy are similar to those which he applied to social problems, an understanding of the former will be helpful in evaluating the kind of goals towards which he felt humanity should strive. Throughout Tales of the Hall Crabbe develops the theme that man must forego attempts to find an ideal world, and instead must learn to accept compromises. As such, Tales of the Hall is an attack on the current romantic philosophy with its insistence that life should be a search for ideal and often unobtainable absolutes.⁵⁴ In his acceptance of the Augustan premise that: "The bliss of Man . . . / Is not to act or think beyond

⁵³His son's phrase. See Life, Ch. vii, p. 166.

⁵⁴T.L. Peacock, in The Four Ages of Poetry (1820), had attacked the attitudes embodied in contemporary poetry when he said, "As to that small portion of our contemporary poetry, which . . . may be called ethical, the most distinguished portion of it, [consists] merely of querulous, egotistical rhapsodies, to express the writer's high dissatisfaction with the world and every thing in it" See Peacock's Four Ages of Poetry: Shelley's Defence of Poetry: Browning's Essay on Shelley, ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith, Percy Reprints (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1923), p. 18.

mankind"⁵⁵ Crabbe's social values are clearly those of a long line of eighteenth century moralists. Yet one of the most striking features of Tales of the Hall is the way in which it reveals how deeply Crabbe was impressed by man's solitary condition, by man's difficulty in bridging the gap between himself and others. Crabbe was absorbed not so much with the eighteenth century pre-occupation of exhorting men to live the good life as with attempting to present an alternative to what, in the early nineteenth century, appeared to be a life without value. Crabbe's advocacy of pragmatic social values is all the more interesting because he offers them as a solution to the problems of individuals who have attempted to live out the romantic ideal and who have found it unsatisfactory.

George, for instance, begins life as a youth who was "pleased in lonely ways to tread" (VII. 66), one for whom "the lover's frenzy ruled the poet's pen" (VII. 63).⁵⁶ George's description of his youth has obvious Byronic overtones:

The mind's disease, with all its strength, stole on,

. . .

I thought I was not of my species one,
But unconnected, injured and undone!

(VII. 430-443)

⁵⁵An Essay on Man I. 189-190, ed. Maynard Mack, Twickenham edition (London, 1950), p. 58.

⁵⁶Compare the character of Scythorp (modelled on Shelley) in Nightmare Abbey: "In the congenial solitude of Nightmare Abbey, the distempered ideas of metaphysical romance and romantic metaphysics had ample time and space to germinate into a fertile crop of chimeras, which rapidly shot up into vigorous and abundant vegetation" (Ch. ii). The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock, ed. David Garnett (London, 1963), p. 362.

Shelley had asserted that "a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively" and that the imagination is "the great instrument of moral good."⁵⁷ Crabbe disliked such arguments because he felt no assurance that man's imaginative constructs had any correspondence with reality. When swayed by "the power of fancy" George is merely obeying every random "impulse of the mind" (XX. 7-8). For Shelley, the imagination gives man hopes of reaching "the eternal, the infinite, and the one,"⁵⁸ but for Crabbe, experience brings an end to "lofty hopes that grasp'd too much" (X. 609).

Similarly, when Richard first hears of Matilda's love for him, he is so happy that for a short time he delights in a Wordsworthian belief in the goodness of all things. In describing his condition he says:

All thought, yet thinking nothing -- all delight
 In every thing, but nothing in my sight!
 Nothing I mark or learn, but am possess'd
 Of joys I cannot paint, and I am bless'd
 In all that I conceive -- whatever is, is best.
 Ready to aid all beings, I would go
 The world around to succour human wo;
 Yet am so largely happy, that it seems
 There are no woes, and sorrows are but dreams
 (VI. 353-361).

Yet this feeling is only transitory, and before long Richard meets a sight which restores him to the world where sorrow and suffering are always present:

⁵⁷Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Defence of Poetry, in Percy Reprints, p. 33.

⁵⁸The Defence of Poetry, p. 27.

Such was the blessing that I sought for pain,
 In some degree to be myself again;
 And when we met a shepherd old and lame,
 Cold and diseased, it seem'd my blood to tame;
 And I was thankful for the moral sight,
 That soberized the vast and wild delight
 (VI. 382-387).

This meeting with the shepherd is reminiscent of that with the Leech Gatherer in "Resolution and Independence." While Wordsworth saw in his old man a reason for hope, for Richard the old shepherd is a salutary warning that man's concern lies with the particular and the tangible, not with the abstract and the ideal. In this passage, Crabbe once again repeats the warning of The Village, that Arcadia is false and dangerous.

As was the case with the lover of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci,"⁵⁹ George's madness and melancholy are the result of a hopeless pursuit of a visionary woman. When George is finally persuaded by a "thrifty uncle" to end his mad search for Rosabella, Crabbe shows him falling into the coils of the second important doctrine of the nineteenth century -- utilitarianism. George's uncle expresses the philosophy of the utilitarian-philistine:

He, when inform'd how men of taste could write,
 Look'd on his ledger with supreme delight;
 Then would be laugh, and, with insulting joy,
 Tell me aloud, "that's poetry, my boy"
 (VII. 391-394).

In renouncing romantic ideals, George swings to the opposite extreme by attempting to find happiness in worldly success. Only late in life, and after he has found Rosabella (now a "fallen woman"), does he realize that commercial competition cannot bring happiness:

⁵⁹Also published in 1819.

'Twas in that chamber, Richard, I began
 To think more deeply of the end of man:
 Was it to jostle all his fellows by,
 To run before them, and say, "here am I,
 Fall down, and worship?" -- Was it, life throughout,
 With circumspection keen to hunt about,
 As spaniels for their game, where might be found
 Abundance more for coffers than abound?
 Or was it life's enjoyments to prefer,
 Like this poor girl, and then to die like her?
 (VII. 750-759)

George's next decision, to find a country retreat, has
 clear eighteenth century literary origins. However unlike his
 literary predecessors, George finds that the pleasures of the
 country are insufficient in themselves. While walking around
 George's estate, Richard remarks on the beauties of the country,
 bringing a confession from George that he can take no pleasure
 in his farm:

But, where th' affections have been deeply tried,
 With other food that mind must be supplied:
 'Tis not in trees or medals to impart
 The powerful medicine for an aching heart;
 The agitation dies, but there is still
 The backward spirit, the resisting will.
 Man takes his body to a country seat,
 But minds, dear Richard, have their own retreat;
 Oft when the feet are pacing o'er the green
 The mind is gone where never grass was seen
 (IV. 112-121).

George is not unlike many of Crabbe's earlier characters. Indeed
 the MS draft shows that Crabbe had originally conceived George to
 be rather like Gwyn "the gentleman farmer" (Tale III of Tales).
 The difference is that George has enough intelligence to accept the
 discovery that romantic ideals are illusory, and enough self-command
 to overcome his melancholy. His determination to surmount despair,

rather than to indulge it, is reminiscent of Samuel Johnson's attitude.⁶⁰ Like Johnson, George may often feel melancholic, and may even indulge the feeling for a short time, but always he returns to his conviction that men should utilize their talents to the best of their ability.

Like Johnson, Crabbe never allowed his conviction that man is alone in the world to become a reason or an excuse to withdraw from social obligations. Even though George finds little satisfaction in his model farm, he still continues with it. Nor does Crabbe allow George's early years spent in search of the mysterious lady to be justified; they are referred to as a waste of time:

O! my dear Richard, what a waste of time
Gave I not thus to lunacy sublime;
What days, months, years, (to useful purpose lost)
Has not this dire infatuation cost?
To this fair vision I, a bonded slave,
Time, duty, credit, honour, comfort, gave;
Gave all -- and waited for the glorious things
That hope expects, but fortune never brings
(VII. 340-347).

Unlike the Romantics, Crabbe does not believe that great passion can be an end in itself. George believes, and Crabbe certainly agrees, that to spend many years chasing a vain shadow is wrong. Such love is not grand idealism, but a disease of the imagination.

⁶⁰ Writing to Boswell about melancholy, Johnson said, "That distrust which intrudes so often on your mind is a mode of melancholy, which, if it be the business of a wise man to be happy, it is foolish to indulge; and if it be a duty to preserve our faculties entire for their proper use, it is criminal." Letter to Boswell, September 11, 1777, in Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. G.B. Hill and L.F. Powell (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1934-1965), III, 135.

About these misspent years, George says:

Conscious of youth's great error -- nay, the crime
Of manhood now -- a dreary waste of time!
Conscious of that account which I must give
How life had past with me -- I strove to live
(VII. 458-461).

Again and again distinct references to the philosophy of Samuel Johnson are heard, until one can hardly resist the inclination to believe that Crabbe has modelled George's philosophy on that of Samuel Johnson.⁶¹ Crabbe believed that man's main purpose was not to fashion illusory ideals for himself but to attempt by diligent effort to make this world a reasonable place in which to live.

In the tale of "The Cathedral-Walk" Crabbe emphasizes the danger of relying for one's happiness on an inner life or on the single experience of romantic love. Relating a story of her youth, an "ancient lady" tells how the sudden death of her lover convinced her for a time that happiness was no longer possible and that she should retire alone:

Then had I grief's proud thoughts, and said, in tone
Of exultation, "World, I am alone!
I care not for thee, thou art vile and base,
And I shall leave thee for a nobler place"
(XX. 259-262).

But with her years has come the wisdom to realize that retreat is foolish:

So I the world abused -- in fact, to me
Urbane and civil as a world could be;

⁶¹ It will be recalled that Johnson's favourite Biblical quotation was "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work." He once had part of it engraved on his watch. See Robert Voitle, Samuel Johnson the Moralist (Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 167.

Nor should romantic grievors thus complain,
 Although but little in the world they gain;
 But let them think if they have nothing done
 To make this odious world so sad a one;
 Or what their worth and virtue, that should make
 This graceless world so pleasant for their sake
 (XX. 263-270).

In "The Maid's Story" much the same sentiment is voiced. When the maid begins to take stock of her life, she is at first pleased. But she is startled to find that while her life seems to be good it is only so in a negative fashion; she does not contribute anything to society. She then recalls another woman whose virtues were positive rather than negative:

One I beheld -- a wife, a mother -- go
 To gloomy scenes of wickedness and wo;
 She sought her way through all things vile and base,
 And made a prison a religious place;
 Fighting her way -- the way that angels fight
 With powers of darkness -- to let in the light
 (XI. 643-648).

The visitor to the prisons is an obvious reference to Elizabeth Fry. Crabbe is saying that abundant opportunity exists for people to mould a better civilization. No one should rest content unless he is in some way helping to contribute to the betterment of society.

As is to be expected in a poem which emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual, Crabbe presents suffering as a brute fact which cannot be dismissed or mitigated. In describing the plight of the sisters cheated out of their competence by the dishonest bank manager, George comments:

"How well it is," said George, "when we possess
 The strength that bears us up in our distress;
 And need not the resources of our pride,
 Our fall from greatness and our wants to hide;
 But have the spirit and the wish to show,
 We know our wants as well as others know.

'Tis true, the rapid turns of fortune's wheel
 Make even the virtuous and the humble feel:
 They for a time must suffer, and but few
 Can bear their sorrows and our pity too"
 (VIII. 33-42).

Since every situation may bring sorrow, it becomes man's duty to help alleviate the pain of this suffering by offering friendship. But the emphasis remains on friendship, not pity; pity often incorporates the assumption of superiority. As William Blake said, "Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody Poor."⁶²

Even from the point of view of religion, Tales of the Hall emphasizes man's moral and social duties. The rector Jacques is primarily a teacher of morals. His parishioners thought Jacques wrong in his continual insistence on good works. "'Heathens,' they said, 'can tell us right from wrong, / But to a Christian higher points belong'" (XIV. 23-24). Although his parishioners nickname him the "Moral Preacher," (Crabbe's italics) and believe him to be insensible to the true Christian tenets, Crabbe indicates that in large part he agrees with Jacques' emphasis on man's moral duties. From what his son says in the Life, Crabbe himself seems to have been a rector like Jacques.⁶³ While Crabbe "complained that men more imbued with a sense of the terrors of the Lord and less with his mercies, succeeded better" as pastors,⁶⁴ he obviously felt that his own function was to act as a guide in the duties of this life.

⁶²"The Human Abstract," in Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789-1794), in The Complete Writings of William Blake, p. 217.

⁶³Life, Ch. ix, pp. 219-220.

⁶⁴Life, Ch. ix, p. 260.

At one point George affirms that man must bear his sufferings and hope for a heavenly reward:

Heaven would not all this wo for man intend
 If man's existence with his wo should end;
 Heaven would not pain, and grief, and anguish give,
 If man was not by discipline to live;
 And for that brighter, better world prepare
 (VII. 781-785).

In this passage Crabbe seems to be asserting the Christian belief that this life is no more than a preparation for the next. While Crabbe himself preached this idea in his sermons,⁶⁵ the idea of this life being a preparation for the next never makes itself felt strongly as a motivating force in George's life. George's religious comment results from his meditations at the death bed of Rosabella; significantly enough it proves transitory. He soon relapses into his love of gain, and although he later gives up commerce, he never reestablishes the ardent hope in God which first moved him at Rosabella's death bed.

Religion plays a surprisingly small role in Tales of the Hall. The emphasis throughout is not on divine love, but on human love. In fact the secular orientation of the poem as a whole led John Wilson to comment:

There is, however, one point on which we cannot agree with Mr. Crabbe, and on which we feel that we may, without arrogance, affirm that he is wrong. He has not made that use of religion in poetry which a poet, a philosopher, and a Christian such as he is, might -- and ought to have made.

⁶⁵See Posthumous Sermons, by the Rev. George Crabbe, ed. John D. Hastings (London, 1850), pp. 160-172.

Wilson felt that Crabbe's picture of man and society was imperfect because it failed to stress "the influence of religion on the whole structure of society and life."⁶⁶ Crabbe mentions religion many times in the poem but rarely as a motive to action. The belief in a life hereafter is offered as consolation for the limited possibilities of happiness in this world.

Crabbe's secular and pragmatic ideals are nowhere better displayed than in Book XIV, "The Natural Death of Love." In this story, which tells of the slow loss of romantic love between Henry and Emma, Crabbe shows that the same standards used to measure social and material progress can be applied to individuals. Like most people of his time, Crabbe was aware of the great increases England had made in terms of economic growth and living standards.⁶⁷ Men of the eighteenth century looked back with pride on the achievements which had been made since the periods of medieval barbarism and superstition. F.M. Eden commented:

From reviewing the æra of freedom which has practically existed since the Revolution, I should venture to assert, a priori, that the exercise of civil and religious liberty must, from the very nature of things, have been attended with a proportionate acquisition of social comforts; and that, not only the aggregate body of the nation must have advanced to wealth and independence, but that the portion of the community, which consists of those who are emphatically called the labouring classes, must have considerably bettered it's condition in the course of the

⁶⁶Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, V (July 1819), 473.

⁶⁷Dorothy George comments, "During the eighteenth century it was the beneficent rather than the catastrophic aspects of the changes which captured attention." England in Transition, p. 156.

present century.⁶⁸

In Book XIV Crabbe explicitly compares romantic love to the enthusiasm of the Middle Ages. When Emma discovers that the first bout of romantic love in her marriage to Henry has passed, she becomes terribly upset. However Henry observes that England has triumphed over the mistakes of enthusiasm, and suggests that they attempt the same plan in their own lives:

There was a time when this heaven-guarded isle,
Whose valleys flourish -- nay, whose mountains smile --
Was steril, wild, deform'd, and beings rude
Creatures scarce wilder than themselves pursued.
The sea was heard around a waste to howl;
The night-wolf answer'd to the whooting owl;
And all was wretched -- Yet who now surveys
The land, withholds his wonder and his praise?
Come, let us try and make our moral view
Improve like this -- this have we power to do
(XIV. 393-402).

Crabbe believed that improvements in social conditions and in an individual's "moral view" could be achieved only when individuals saw themselves and the problems around them as they really were. In the original MS Emma had said, "It seems from fairy land we come / To this of truth!" The land of truth, Emma finds, is "bleak and cold, / And all is dark and dull."⁶⁹ As he had done in The Village, Crabbe here shows that man could find happiness only when he accepted and embraced the darkness.

It is worth remarking, however, that Henry might have found more people to disagree with him about England's progress than he

⁶⁸Sir F.M. Eden, The State of the Poor, I, 404.

⁶⁹Poems by George Crabbe, "Variants Section," III, 527.

suspected. A number of Regency writers withheld their wonder and praise when they surveyed the effects of change in England.⁷⁰ In Galt's Annals of the Parish (1821) the Reverend Balwhidder noted that he attempted to keep his people "contented with their lowly estate; for in that same spirit of improvement, which was so busy everywhere, I could discern something like a shadow, that showed it was not altogether of that pure advantage which avarice led all so eagerly to believe."⁷¹ Southey's objections in his Colloquies to the effects of industrialism have been noted earlier. Wordsworth in Books VIII and IX of The Excursion (1814) had also expressed his doubts about the "darker side / Of this great change" (VIII. 151-152). In Headlong Hall (1816) T.L. Peacock had included a debate between Foster, who argues for the benefits of material prosperity, and Escot, who believes that the new industrialization has blighted the landscape and destroyed the integrity of the workers (Ch. vii). Yet one must recall that Crabbe offered a long-term view of England's growing prosperity; however strongly one might wish to cavil, there seems little doubt that he is correct. Even Wordsworth, although he disliked the "proud complacency" of the materialist, admitted that he exulted "to see / An intellectual mastery exercised / O'er the blind elements" (The Excursion VIII. 200-202).

Even though Crabbe may have been correct in his belief that

⁷⁰Even in the eighteenth century not everyone praised England's progress. Goldsmith commented in The Deserted Village: "wealth accumulates, and men decay" (line 52).

⁷¹Annals of the Parish, in Works of John Galt, ed. D. Storrar Meldrum (Edinburgh and London, 1895), I, 194.

England had benefitted from her new prosperity, one still wonders why he wished to express this general fact at a time when England was undergoing a short-term period of economic depression.

Recalling that Crabbe's intention in Tales of the Hall was to offer an alternative to the bleak romantic melancholy which Byron had made so fashionable, one might conclude that Crabbe's cheerful summary of England's prosperity was meant to counter the gloom of economic writers such as Malthus. Yet with the exception of "Smugglers and Poachers" and "Ruth," Tales of the Hall records little social detail of contemporary life.⁷² In the absence of such detail, Henry's glowing account of prosperity reads not as an attack on the pessimism of the economists, but as a description of eighteenth century England. As has already been mentioned, Crabbe's terminology for the political differences between Richard and George certainly belongs to the late eighteenth rather than the early nineteenth century. Such being the case, one may fairly conclude that in Tales of the Hall Crabbe has made little attempt to give his characters a strictly contemporary setting.⁷³ Through-

⁷²Tales of the Hall however is not wholly without topical allusions. Both Marmion (1808) and Lara (1814) are mentioned (VIII. 819). Moreover Crabbe alludes to the Napoleonic Wars when he says: "But in these times the causes of our strife / Are hearth and altar, liberty and life" (XVI. 207-208). The most topical reference is that to Elizabeth Fry (XI. 643-648); her visits to Newgate began in 1817. Yet in spite of these references, one rarely feels the pressure of contemporary events as an active influence in the poem.

⁷³Interestingly enough, a great many of the Victorian novelists also chose to place their novels in a setting from the past. Dicken's A Tale of Two Cities and Mrs. Gaskell's Sylvia's Lovers are only two of many such examples.

out Tales of the Hall one can see that Crabbe emphasizes neither what might be nor what ought to be, but what is. His contention is that many people fail to find happiness because they are so busy searching for absolute ideals that they never learn to understand the social conditions around them and therefore never learn to cope. The difficulty with many social critics is that, like Gulliver, they fall under the spell of the Houyhnhnms, and become incapable of appreciating that there are other alternatives to the Yahoos. With his devotion to truth, Crabbe insisted that the important subject for the writer was not an abstract realization of the battle between good and evil, but a description of the problems faced by individuals here and now.

IV

When many of the stories in Tales of the Hall are based on the theme of love, it is hardly surprising that one finds little social criticism. Always an acute observer of Crabbe, Jeffrey immediately noticed the change in subject matter: "It is rather remarkable, too, that Mr C. seems to become more amorous as he grows older, -- the interest of almost all the stories in this collection turning on the tender passion" ⁷⁴ Yet when the

⁷⁴The Edinburgh Review, XXXII (1819), 126.

two main characters, George and Richard, have been described in political terminology, one might expect that the poem, by means of its very structure, would offer some social commentary. The extent to which this happens however is slight indeed, the reason being that Crabbe has shifted his emphasis from the social to the psychological. In Tales of the Hall, Crabbe is interested not so much in commenting on the relations between people and events as he is in exploring the relation between motive and action.

The emphasis upon the motives of actions rather than their social consequences is brought out particularly clearly in his treatment of the subject of charity -- one of the main issues raised by Tales of the Hall. Nor is this emphasis upon charity unexpected when one recalls that at the time Crabbe was writing Tales of the Hall the economy of the country, especially the agricultural interest, was depressed. With unemployment high and wages low, there was naturally a good deal of hardship and dissatisfaction amongst the working classes. The year 1819, one remembers, was the year of Peterloo and the Six Acts. Crabbe of course emphasizes throughout that the rich should help the poor, but in every case the act of charity and its consequences are little noted; instead Crabbe concentrates on giving an analysis of the motives of the alms-giver. In a certain sense Crabbe's treatment of the act of charity resembles that of the eighteenth century humanitarian poets such as Savage, Pomfret and Akenside.⁷⁵ But

⁷⁵See the discussion of eighteenth century humanitarianism in literature in Chapter 2.

where the eighteenth century poets generally stressed how the act of charity demonstrates a man's pure spirit and his good taste, Crabbe shows that the impulse behind the act is often selfish and egotistical. Deeply impressed by man's solitary condition, Crabbe found that charity is often no more than a selfish attempt to make contact with others, an expedient which an individual employs when unable to satisfy his need for human companionship in other ways.

When Crabbe shows young Rupert attempting to woo the middle-aged maid of Book XI, he compares him ironically to Sir Charles Grandison. Rupert pretends to live entirely for other people when he is actually in love with his own goodness. Rupert describes his own "virtues":

The humble good of happy swains to share,
And from the cottage drive distress and care;
To the dear infants make some pleasures known,
And teach, he gravely said, the virtues to his own
(XI. 958-961).

Amongst most poets of the eighteenth century Rupert's sentiments would have been treated seriously as evidence of his goodness. Crabbe however has portrayed them ironically, as the phrase "he gravely said" indicates. The point is not that Crabbe dislikes Rupert's ideal, but that he wishes to show such ideals, for most people at least, are merely romantic theorizing. Rupert does not deeply care for the poor; he mentions them because he thinks they may bring a tear of sympathy from the maid.

Crabbe found that people often used charity as a means of social convenience.⁷⁶ When the maid and her friend retire to a

⁷⁶ See Crabbe's treatment of the motives of those who help to finance the building of the hospital in The Borough, Letter XVII.

rural village, both determine to keep their good character and win the esteem of their neighbours. They deliberately set out to gain

a reputation for benevolence:

We were the ladies of the place, and found
Protection and respect the country round;
We gave, and largely, for we wish'd to live
In good repute -- for this 'tis good to give
(XI. 735-738).

In this case the motive is hardly charitable. The maid wishes respect, and one of the ways to gain this respect is by appearing charitable. Yet a lack of pure benevolence does not embitter Crabbe; he presents the selfish reasons with a minimum of irony.

In other cases, especially when the real motive for appearing charitable is pride, Crabbe's descriptions are not so sympathetic. In Book XVII the widow's second husband, once he has achieved affluence and success, wishes to play the role of public benefactor:

As wealth increased, ambition now began
To swell the soul of the aspiring man.

. . .

He would, moreover, on the Bench debate
On sundry questions -- when a magistrate;
Would talk of all that to the state belongs,
The rich man's duties, and the poor man's wrongs;
He would with favourites of the people rank,
And him the weak and the oppress'd should thank
(XVII. 291-304).

In the mind of such a person, public duty and charity are not ends in themselves, but useful tools to increase one's reputation or to help play an expected social role.

Novelists at this period were fond of showing that their

heroines possessed a keen social sensibility by portraying them visiting the homes of cottagers to dispense alms. Jane Austen, for instance, portrays Emma paying "a charitable visit . . . to a poor sick family, who lived a little way out of Highbury."⁷⁷ And John Moore shows his hero Mordaunt falling in love with Miss Clifford the first time he sees her coming from a charitable visit to a cottage.⁷⁸ In Book XIV Crabbe has Henry cast doubts on Emma's reason for her visits to poor cottagers when he says:

Well, I know, you feel
 For suffering men, and would their sufferings heal,
 But when at certain huts you chose to call,
 At certain seasons, was compassion all?
 I there beheld thee, to the wretched dear
 As angels to expiring saints appear
 When whispering hope -- I saw an infant press'd
 And hush'd to slumber on my Emma's breast!
 Hush'd be each rude suggestion! -- Well I know,
 With a free hand your bounty you bestow,
 And to these objects frequent comforts send;
 But still they see not now their pitying friend
 (XIV. 296-307).

As this passage reveals, Emma's reasons for her charitable visits were only partly charitable; she also had an eye to the effect her charity would have on Henry.

Women at this time were often recommended to devote their time and talents to the poor. Hannah More and her evangelical friends saw such an effort amongst women as something good in itself. Wilberforce once remarked, "There is no class of persons whose condition has been more improved within my recollection than

⁷⁷Jane Austen, Emma, in The Novels of Jane Austen, ed. R.W. Chapman, p. 83 (Vol. I, Ch. x).

⁷⁸John Moore, Mordaunt, ed. W.L. Renwick, pp. 312-313 (Letter 64).

that of unmarried women. Formerly there seemed to be nothing useful in which they could be naturally busy, but now they may always find an object in attending to the poor."⁷⁹ Crabbe's interest in the subtleties of motivation enabled him to see that this type of charity was often merely a substitute for frustrated or unrequited love. Book XVIII contains a typical example of charity from such an impulse. While waiting for her lover to return, Ellen retreats to her native village to perform good works amongst the poor:

And Ellen to her native village fled,
With native feeling -- there she oped her door,
Her heart, her purse, and comforted the poor,
The sick, the sad -- and there she pass'd her days,
Deserving much, but never seeking praise:

. . .

Nor turn'd from any, save when Love pursued;
For, though to love disposed, to kindness prone,
She thought of Cecil, and she lived alone
(XVIII. 233-244).

Crabbe of course never condemns such charity; the end may be good even though the means are suspect. In the case of Ellen, his opinion that her good deeds result from her kind nature is particularly apparent. But the last line of the above quoted passage indicates that Ellen's charity is only a temporary interest while she waits for Cecil to return.⁸⁰ Where Wilberforce looked at

⁷⁹Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, The Life of William Wilberforce (London, 1839), I, 238.

⁸⁰If one compares Miss Burney's treatment of the same topic in Cecilia, one can appreciate Crabbe's development of a difficult subject. When Cecilia is disappointed in her expectations of London life, she turns to help the poor. But Miss Burney does not appreciate the irony implicit in this decision. She attempts to portray Cecilia's good works as being motivated only by altruism. See Cecilia, 4th ed. (London, 1784), I, 88.

the good which had accrued from Hannah More's charitable work, and concluded, "This is truly magnificent, the really sublime in character,"⁸¹ Crabbe was moved in a Lytton Strachey manner to probe below the surface and reveal the hidden motives leading to the good actions.

Where the Evangelicals often mutilated the spirit of charity was in believing that the contract was a one-way proposition. The rich gave the money; the poor were supposed to give the gratitude. Crabbe believed that when a rich man decided to help a poor man the debt was contracted on both sides. It will be recalled that in Letter III of The Borough the curate remarked that when relief is properly given "All painful sense of obligation dies" (III. 313). Crabbe's portrayal of this theme -- at length with George and Richard -- is presented in miniature in Book III with Hector Blane and his protégé, Charles. A rich man, Sir Hector decides to patronize "a widow's son." But Sir Hector helps the boy for his own peculiar reasons -- "He tried the luxury of doing good" (III. 139).⁸² When Charles proves to be only a little above average in his studies, Sir Hector is not at first deterred:

"It is delightful," he observed, "to raise
And foster merit -- it is more than praise"
(III. 160-161).

But when Charles finishes his studies, Sir Hector begins to realize that he still must provide for the boy:

⁸¹The Life of William Wilberforce, I, 238.

⁸²This story has obvious similarities to "The Patron" (Tale V, Tales) and "David Morris" which were discussed in Chapter 6.

since he The deed was pleasant while the praise was new,
 Crabbe But none the progress would with wonder view.
 It was a debt contracted; he who pays
 A debt is just, but must not look for praise:
 The deed that once had fame must still proceed,
 Though fame no more proclaims "how great the deed!"
 The boy is taken from his mother's side,
 And he who took him must be now his guide.
 But this, alas! instead of bringing fame,
 A tax, a trouble, to my lord became
 (III. 168-177).

Sir Hector decides that the cheapest way of ending his commitment is to send him to sea. But to his surprise, Charles, who wishes to be an artist, refuses the offer. When Sir Hector washes his hands of his protégé, Charles determines to attempt his own fortune. In this he fails, and dies a pauper.

The point to the story is not that Charles is a great artist badly treated. Nor is it that Sir Hector should have maintained Charles in the life of his choice, for patronage must have limits. But the poem reveals that far more is involved in charity than the sum of money which changes hands. Crabbe wants to know why Sir Hector gave the money and what effect this money will have on the attitudes of Charles. Charity, Crabbe reveals, is not the result of man's love for his fellow man, but of his selfish desire to seem benevolent. Neither Sir Hector nor Charles has any feeling for one another. Each is an isolated individual pursuing his own interests.

In his own life Crabbe was renowned for his generosity to the poor.⁸³ Indeed Joanna Baillie felt Crabbe was too charitable

⁸³Life, Ch. ix, p. 221, and Ch. ix, pp. 260-261.

since he gave both to the worthy and the unworthy poor.⁸⁴ Yet Crabbe was a much better analyst of his own motives. In a letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter, he remarked:

A poor Woman called at my Door, since I have been Conversing with you, and gained her Purpose by naming Taunton as her Home [where Miss Charter lived]: so it is that Motives insinuate themselves into our Minds and we oftentimes impute that to our Resolution or our prudence which was caused by some kind thought dropt among our other Cogitations and overruling them all.⁸⁵

In another instance he commented: "For Heaven's sake do not think me over attentive to my Duty I am not exemplary and half my virtue is unavailing Desire."⁸⁶ Even in his own life, Crabbe recognized that many of his actions were influenced by motives he barely perceived.

Because of his emphasis upon the need to understand motives, and his insistence that man must learn to cope with imperfect social conditions, Crabbe might easily have neglected altogether to mention the necessity of social changes. Yet as "Smugglers and Poachers" and "Ruth" indicate, Crabbe believed it possible to promote changes simultaneously in both individuals and society. Moreover Crabbe several times satirizes individuals who believe "whatever is, is right." In Book XVII he describes the lovely but superficial widow who is unable to think for herself -- except in the matter of obtaining

⁸⁴Letter from Joanna Baillie to Crabbe's son, c. 1834. Quoted from Life, Ch. x, p. 301.

⁸⁵Letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter, November 9, 1824, The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 273.

⁸⁶Letter to Miss Elizabeth Charter, c. November 25, 1815, The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 116.

husbands. After the death of her last husband, Crabbe gives the following ironic description:

The widow'd lady to her cot retired,
And there she lives delighted and admired.
Civil to all, compliant and polite,
Disposed to think, "whatever is, is right,"
She wears the widow's weeds, she gives the widow's mite.
At home awhile, she in the autumn finds
The sea an object for reflecting minds,
And change for tender spirits; there she reads,
And weeps in comfort in her graceful weeds
(XVII. 521-529).

If one can weep in comfort it is perhaps easy to believe that "whatever is, is right."

Crabbe again satirizes this belief in the essential rightness of all things when George finally meets Rosabella, his mysterious lady. Seeing George dismayed by her life of less than exemplary virtue, Rosabella attempts to hide her faults in specious philosophy:

Come, my dear friend, discard that look of care,
All things were made to be, as all things are;
All to seek pleasure as the end design'd,
The only good in matter or in mind
(VII. 593-596).

Rosabella has coupled Pope's famous dictum with the utilitarianism of Bentham to produce a comfortable philosophy allowing her to pursue her every inclination while attributing the results to fate. As has already been seen, Richard in the first flush of romantic love had also believed for a short time "whatever is, is best" (VI. 357), but he soon realized that this represented only his own feelings of euphoria and not the real state of the world.

Undoubtedly Crabbe's realization that very little was known about the causes of men's actions accounts in large part for his

lack of interest in discussions of abstract ideas and social institutions. For, if actions are the result of temperament, habit and prejudice, then to understand the way men function in society one has to study not the institutions but the psychological causes that lead men to build these institutions. — Since the time of Locke, philosophers had accepted that a study of man must begin with a study of the mind. In Tales of the Hall Crabbe sets out to do exactly this; his first discovery is that reason plays only a small part in man's decision-making acts. More than seventy-five years before, David Hume had asserted that, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions."⁸⁷ Hume meant that the feelings always govern conduct. But Hume also believed that the means to reach the ends determined by feeling are efficiently chosen with the help of reason. What Crabbe wishes to show, however, is that the mind of man is so subtle that it often deludes individuals that reason is helping to select the means, when in actual fact the individual is guided by his passions only -- and the basest ones at that.

In Book I, where presumably Crabbe is the narrator, he says, "We cannot nature by our wishes rule, / Nor at our will her warm emotions cool" (I. 340-341). In describing Harry Bland, George says, "His mind approves the virtue he forsakes, / And yet forsakes her" (III. 433-434). George, and the reader too, cannot help sympathizing with a person such as Harry, who knows what is right,

⁸⁷David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Grose (London, 1874), II, 195 (Book II, Part III, Sec. iii).

approves it, and yet finds he cannot follow it. Similarly Richard at first thinks his brother to be a distinguished representative of the upper class who is always calm and cool. But he discovers that George is as human as himself:

Then, thou too, Brother, couldst of weakness tell;
Thou, too, hast found the wishes that rebel
Against the sovereign reason

(VII. 41-43).

In "Delay has Danger," Henry is in part the victim of his own subconscious desires. "'Tis thus our secret passions work their way, / And the poor victims know not they obey" (XIII. 370-371). Jacques notes that the commonplace -- "the passions, insolent and strong, / Bear our weak minds their rapid course along" (XII. 63-64) -- has enormous implications for the study of human nature. In describing the workings of the unconscious mind Crabbe was taking over an idea common among many Romantics and greatly in vogue. In a hostile analysis in The Prelude of his own Godwinian phase, Wordsworth had commented how the "passions had the privilege to work, / And never hear the sound of their own names" (X. 813-814).⁸⁸

Not only do the emotions conquer reason, so do man's habits.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Although the Romantics emphasized the workings of the unconscious, the idea was by no means new with them. Pope had said: "Oft in the Passions' wild rotation tost, / Our spring of action to ourselves is lost (Moral Essays I. 41-42). And Johnson commented: "Consider the state of mankind, and inquire how few can be supposed to act upon any occasions, whether small or great, with all the reasons of action present to their minds" (Rasselas, Ch. xxix).

⁸⁹ In the late eighteenth century, moral philosophers placed great emphasis upon man's habits in determining his actions. James Beattie noted: "Something, no doubt, depends on the peculiar constitution of different minds; and something too perhaps on the structure
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It will be recalled that Crabbe attributes many of the differences between George and Richard to their different habits -- "We saw the difference by their habits made" (II. 30). George remarks that he became resigned to a life of commerce when "The force of habit held me to the oar" (VII. 800). Jacques comments about himself: "Small daily actions into habits grew" (X. 482). George wanted to forgive Rosabella her life of promiscuity, and Rosabella wanted to renounce such a life -- if for no other reason than to win George's protection. But despite George's encouragement and her own good intentions, she fails. As George says, "she did not know / How deeply rooted evil habits grow" (VII. 694-695).

In his description of man's lack of control over himself Crabbe may well have had in mind Christ's plea -- "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" -- since he says:

Let mortal frailty judge how mortals frail:
Thus in their strongest resolutions fail,
And, though we blame, our pity will prevail
(XVI. 903-905).

Yet in Tales of the Hall man's lack of control over his own actions becomes the starting point for many far-reaching conclusions.

Clearly if a man is not in control of himself he can hardly be held responsible for his actions. The question can then arise if man has any right to pass sentence on his fellow man. Farmer Ellis asserts that man does not have the right: "Tell me not, sir, of

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and temperament of different bodies: but in fashioning the character, and in giving impulse and direction to genius, the influence of habit is certainly very great." Elements of Moral Science (Edinburgh, 1790), I, 227-228.

rights, and wrongs, or powers! / I felt it written -- Vengeance is not ours!" (XII. 848-849). Tales of the Hall is a series of variations on the theme of love, in which individuals are confronted with situations in which not only do they have great difficulty in choosing correctly, but the reader also becomes aware that formal, theoretical moral truths are of little use in judging such situations.⁹⁰

Although most of the stories end sadly, Tales of the Hall is not pessimistic in tone. One of the reasons is that Crabbe rarely applies absolute value judgements. He constantly shifts the perspective from which the reader sees and judges the characters. Tragedy of course cannot take place in a setting where the moral response is ambivalent. In fact one of Crabbe's most insistent themes is the impossibility of applying an abstract theory of right and wrong to every situation. As was seen earlier, in his own life Crabbe found difficulty in taking sides even on such an important measure as parliamentary reform.⁹¹ Decisions for Crabbe were never clear cut and certain; men had to make the best compromise choice possible under the circumstances. For example, the story of Henry and Emma tells of the natural death of love. The emphasis is no longer upon the mistakes of individuals but upon the natural development of forces within a given situation. If

⁹⁰ Crabbe is however unwilling to give everyone carte blanche freedom to use this argument. In Book XI when Frederick claims that truth is impossible to find, the maid asks disarmingly: "If truth be hidden, why art thou so sure?" (XI. 724).

⁹¹ See above, p. 569.

one asks whether Belwood was wrong to run off with the school teacher's daughter, the answer is not at once apparent. Belwood did what seemed natural and logical in the given situation. Can one blame Ruth for committing suicide? Perhaps not when one considers the alternative choices. In Book XIII, Henry leaves his fiancée at the request of his father to visit a noble lord. While at the hall, he falls into a situation where he is forced to marry the orphan Frances. Yet it would be a very strict and austere judge that would feel Henry was wrong to meet Frances. Nor are the Lord and the steward to blame for attempting to bring Henry and Frances together. Henry could have avoided the situation in the first place by refusing to leave Cecilia, but such an action would have meant disobeying his father. Crabbe has placed Henry in a complex situation where blame and responsibility are difficult to apportion.

In attempting to analyze the various love stories, one rapidly comes to the conclusion that Crabbe has deliberately created situations where ordinary moral rules cannot be applied. For instance in Book XIII, "Delay Has Danger," the title is in direct contradiction to Malthusian principles of prudence. In all Crabbe's previous tales he had suggested that young people would be well advised to wait a number of years before marrying. Yet in this tale, delay does bring danger.⁹² When the reviewer for

⁹²Since most of the characters in Tales of the Hall are not in danger of falling into poverty, no urgent economic reason exists to urge late marriage.

The Monthly Review lashed out at the "ale-house politics" of "William Bailey," what he disliked was the compromise ending in which Frances is rewarded with William's love.⁹³ He believed that Lord Robert's seduction of Frances had left her unworthy of William. In effect, he wished to see William treat Frances as Farmer Ellis refused to treat his unfaithful wife. But Crabbe observes that William and Frances can and do live happily together in spite of Frances' love affair with Lord Robert. William and Frances enjoy married life because neither of them follow impossible moral standards.⁹⁴

In Book X, Jacques tells a story of his youth that illustrates well the irrelevance of generalized moral axioms. In order to gain his father's permission to marry, Jacques attempts to convince him that Whigs and Tories need not quarrel:

First I began my father's heart to move,
By boldly saying "We are born to love;"
My father answer'd, with an air of ease,
"Well! very well! be loving if you please!
Except a man insults us or offends,
In my opinion we should all be friends"
(X. 176-181).

Such generalities, while true, never really help in any crucial decision:

⁹³See above, p. 580.

⁹⁴Maria Edgeworth permits one of her characters to argue for a standard of marriage which cuts across human values. She says, "Nothing could tend more to prevent the ill conduct of women in high life, than the certainty that men who, from their fortune, birth, and character, might be deemed the most desirable matches, would shun alliances with the daughters of women of tainted reputation" (my italics). Patronage, 2nd ed., I, 131. Concerned for the sanctity of marriage, Miss Edgeworth advocates a cause which is clearly opposed to the best human values. Crabbe disliked the humbug of such impossible and absurdly high standards.

This gain'd me nothing; little would accrue
 From clearing points so useless though so true
 (X. 182-183).

Jacques' conclusion is indicative of the point that Tales of the Hall makes in its entirety, that general moral truths -- men should love one another, it is wrong to lie, one should be honest -- are of little use in all but the most simple situations where there is no conflict of duty.

Robert Chamberlain has argued that Crabbe was essentially a conservative moralist: "Crabbe continued to support the established, long-familiar code whose roots lay ultimately in the medieval scorn of the world."⁹⁵ But this is to underestimate the depth of Crabbe's exploration of moral themes. In Tales of the Hall people like Farmer Ellis have to rediscover both for themselves and for the gentry that man cannot live by a few simple rules. Certainly Tales of the Hall suggests that the problem of sorting out right from wrong may in the last analysis be irrelevant. In Book III, George asks:

How is it, men, when they in judgment sit
 On the same fault, now censure, now acquit?
 Is it not thus, that here we view the sin,
 And there the powerful cause that drew us in?
 (III. 396-399)

What Crabbe has done is to supply the reader with a great deal of information about these powerful causes, thereby making moral decisions difficult. What is required of man is not judgment but understanding.

⁹⁵Robert L. Chamberlain, George Crabbe, p. 116.

Crabbe's interest in complex social and psychological situations lies in pointing out that man has little to guide him in making decisions. The aphorisms of moral exhortation are of little value; they prove useful only in absurdly simple situations. Fielding, in something of the same dilemma, relied on man's good nature. But Fielding's idea of the good-natured man actually applies to few. Tom Jones is hardly the paradigm case. Indeed, Mrs. Miller says he is "infinitely too good to live in this world" (XVIII, xi). Divines of course claimed to have a superior knowledge outside the realm of nature. This was God's word as revealed in Scripture and various signs. Crabbe does not discuss the role that Scripture can play in helping men to make decisions, but he introduces two tales in which supernatural signs play an important role.

As if to underline how alone man is, in both cases the supernatural proves to be completely ineffectual in providing answers. Interest in the supernatural was still at a high pitch in the early nineteenth century, and not a few people entertained the idea as a last resort, that perhaps the Divine Will employed ghosts to direct man.⁹⁶ In Book XVI, "Lady Barbara; or, the Ghost," Crabbe gives a serious account of a ghost story.⁹⁷ The

⁹⁶ Many people believed in ghosts. In 1778 Dr. Johnson said, "It is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it; but all belief is for it." *Life of Johnson*, III, 230. Boswell's own fear of ghosts was notorious. See *Boswell's London Journal*, ed. F.A. Pottle (New York, 1950), p. 214.

⁹⁷ Although it seems obvious by the end of the poem that Crabbe does not believe in Lady Barbara's ghost, the reviewer for
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story of Lady Barbara is interesting for its unusually free characterization of religion. Lady Barbara and her brother Richard have been brought up by their father to be free-thinkers. But at the time their father dies, they still have found no eternal truths, and their ideas remain unsettled:

Free, sad discourse was ours; we often sigh'd
To think we could not in some truths confide.
Our father's final words gave no content;
We found not what his self-reliance meant
(XVI. 488-491).

In attempting to give them some religious instruction, their relatives present so many different accounts of the "truth" that Lady Barbara and her brother become even more confused. Finally they agree that the only certain way to learn the truth is for the one who dies first to return and instruct the other.

Years later, on the night of Richard's death, Lady Barbara sees a "vision." Significantly enough, while the ghost remains vague about religious matters, he cautions Lady Barbara that she needs guidance in her personal life if she is to avoid misery. The ghost predicts that her husband will soon die, and warns her that she must never remarry. Some years after the death of her husband Lady Barbara is faced with the decision whether or not to remarry when a youth to whom she gave a mother's care begins to woo her. The boy finally overcomes her scruples, and against the advice of the ghost she remarries. The outcome is predictable.

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The British Critic certainly seems to have believed Crabbe meant to portray a real ghost. The British Critic, N.S., XII (1819), 298.

The boy lover proves a bad husband, fulfilling the ghost's prediction of a miserable life. Crabbe's last comment is just:

One moral let us draw,
Be it a ghost or not the lady saw.
If our discretion tells us how to live,
We need no ghost a helping hand to give;
But, if discretion cannot us restrain,
It then appears a ghost would come in vain
(XVI. 963-968).

Signs sent by God would serve no purpose, since man has to interpret the signs, and he will naturally interpret them as he wishes.

The second ghost story, not nearly so fully developed as the first, merely adds to the irony. In "The Cathedral Walk" a rather "spiritual" young girl, searching for the ghost of her beloved, mistakes a grave-robber for the ghost. Ironically enough, even the grave-robber does not find what he is looking for.

In the end, Crabbe paints something of what might now be called an existential picture of man -- man alone with the abyss. Neither spiritual signs, nor moral formulae can guide man through the complexities of life. Possibly the most distressing feature of Crabbe's description is that man has no control over his most deeply felt and important responses. The existentialist at least believes in the freedom of the will; Crabbe at times suggests, "That which is done is that we're born to do" (XIX. 484). When Emma rebukes Henry for no longer loving her, Henry replies: "It is the fault of nature, not of me" (XIV. 153). He repeats this sentiment when he says: "'tis in vain / The course of love and nature to restrain" (XIV. 204-205). In Book III Jacques asserts that while education can check "the progress of each idle shoot,"

in the end the man is "what you saw the boy would be" (III. 102-107). As Crabbe shows, most people live out their lives pretending to be moved by personal, social and religious ideals which in practice have little effect on their lives. Each of the characters in "Gretna Green" pretends to act in the best interests of the others, but Crabbe reveals that Belwood wishes to gain his freedom; Clara acts out of simple-minded vanity; Mrs. Sidmere wishes social position; and Dr. Sidmere covets wealth and power.

Although Crabbe has chosen tales of love to illustrate his theme that man is at the mercy of outside forces, he clearly felt his diagnosis applied to all aspects of human life. In a letter to Mary Leadbeater, he commented:

With respect to our religious associations and fellowship, there is much, I believe, that does not depend upon our own will or our own conviction. We are born with such convictions, and are led, guided, and governed by circumstances and situations over which the will has no control.⁹⁸

Wordsworth and Byron had both described man's loneliness, and in much more moving language than Crabbe, but the point is that where the Romantic poets tended to relish the idea that the man of sensibility is a lonely outcast, Crabbe fought against it, and attempted to show some sort of solution. When he retired to Binning, George commented: "Yet much is lost, and not yet much is found" (VII. 819). Crabbe believed that the first step towards finding positive answers was a devotion to truth. As he had done

⁹⁸Letter to Mary Leadbeater, March 26, 1824, in The Leadbeater Papers, II, 385.

in The Village, Crabbe at the beginning of Tales of the Hall asks inspiration from "fair Truth" (I. 121). Most of man's problems, Crabbe feels, stem from his inability to understand the real causes of his actions. In "The Preceptor Husband" Finch's mother can see that because her son, a supposed student of knowledge, has willfully duped himself about his bride's interest in science he will be most unhappy. Yet she is powerless to help because Finch will not recognize his own motives. She concludes:

Truth! for whose beauty all their love profess;
And yet how many think it ugliness!
(IX. 202-203)

Crabbe has often been condemned for his painstaking studies of ugliness, yet his critics have failed to see that Crabbe's principle -- ugliness is truth -- is simply the obverse of that of Keats.

Crabbe's "truth" was not of the fanatical variety that leads the Alastors of the world on long and lonely journeys after perfection. It was a "truth" that would permit the Alastors to recognize why they needed such journeys. But this self-knowledge was not enough in itself; one had still the difficult problem of learning to live with other people about whom one could never know very much. As Jacques comments:

although alone to be
Is freedom; so are men in deserts free
(X. 52-53).

By the end of his life George has learned a great deal about his own motives but he finds that until the time he met Richard he "look'd not to have found, / A care, an interest in the world around" (XXII. 247-248). Crabbe might be thought to be illogical

in his presentation of George and Richard's growing love for one another, since he had previously shown that man's chief motivation came from selfish desires. Yet Crabbe has it both ways, since he admits that George's need of Richard's love is selfish. The reason that Crabbe does not violate his own principle is because George, although motivated by selfishness, has enough self-knowledge to leave Richard his entire freedom. George does not want to be a patron but a friend; he does not attempt, therefore, to make Richard accept his own view of what is right and true. The reason why the other characters had failed in their search for love and friendship was that they attempted to force their friends to serve their own needs. Finch, for instance, could not value Augusta for her own merits, but wished her to be the intellectual that he believed he wanted.

That Crabbe followed his own principle of toleration can be seen in his choice of characters; he includes, without condemning, persons of creeds and beliefs opposed to his own. Lady Barbara's father, for instance, is an atheist. The maid's third prospective husband believes that "the lessons taught / By priests were all with superstition fraught" (XI. 174-175). Unlike many writers, Crabbe did not exclude people or ideas because he disagreed with them.

That toleration and conciliation should be the values which Crabbe praises highly is not unexpected when one notes the word he chooses most often to describe happiness -- "repose." Tales of the

Hall, it will be recalled, ends with Crabbe's blessing -- "Health, reader, and repose!" Tale IX also ends with "repose," although this time with an edge of irony. After four attempts at courtship, the rector Jacques finally finds peace and "repose" from his frustrated sexual desires (X. 741). Sir Owen Dale comments that "these female foes, / Or good or ill, will murder our repose" (XII. 850-851). Crabbe does not envision "repose" as a state of complete passivity. He notes that for Robert the poacher, "danger only could repose produce" (XXI. 157). Happiness or repose, for Crabbe, is found only when a person discovers for himself his own nature and then attempts to live the life best suited to it.

Crabbe's emphasis upon toleration has important ramifications when applied to social concerns, although in Tales of the Hall the parallels are not often or explicitly drawn. However at the end of the poem George avers that conciliation is necessary not only in personal but in political relations:

Then thou and I, an independent two,
May have our parties, and defend them too;
Thy liberal notions, and my loyal fears,
Will give us subjects for our future years
(XXII. 412-415).

Crabbe has learned that the one thing to be avoided in all spheres of life is bigotry. Since Crabbe had shown that ideas were projections of personality, his emphasis upon conciliation is not unexpected. For Crabbe, ideas are not something that one can abstract from the person holding them. What was required was an appreciation of the reasons why a person holds the system of belief that he does. One can see that Crabbe attempted to follow this

principle in his own life. In a letter to Mary Leadbeater he described what he considered to be the wrong-headed bigotry of a missionary friend of hers, Thady Connellan:

He gave us (in a public meeting) a long, very long account of his efforts to convert Catholics by a communication of the Bible, and gave us instances of the avidity with which some Catholic poor people sought and read them. His zeal was the best of him; I can have no doubt of that, but much of the discretion of his avowed opposition to the Catholics, and his complaint, where I am not sure he was not the aggressor: he surely could not expect that a Catholic priest (who is sincere) will quietly give up the people whom he has guided.⁹⁹

Mary Leadbeater paid Crabbe the dubious compliment of calling him "the first moral poet of this time,"¹⁰⁰ but a few years later she explained what she meant by this phrase:

Dear friend, raise thy moral strain; call for the gentle spirit of conciliation: it will subdue the existing evil more effectually than all that the gallows, the bayonet, and exile can do.¹⁰¹

However much one would like to agree with Crabbe's conclusion about the need for toleration and conciliation, one cannot help wondering whether his model of personal relations is applicable to social and political subjects. After all, the difference in politics between George and Richard is slight indeed. Has Crabbe not won his point because he has removed all real grounds

⁹⁹Letter to Mary Leadbeater, September 7, 1818, in The Leadbeater Papers, II, 356.

¹⁰⁰Letter to Crabbe, April 15, 1820, in The Leadbeater Papers, II, 367.

¹⁰¹Letter to Crabbe, June 10, 1823, in The Leadbeater Papers, II, 381.

for political controversy between the brothers? At the end of the poem, George comments that Jacques would "oversee our creed." Had Richard been an enthusiastic dissenter, such a solution would not have been welcomed. Nor would political debate have been so easy had Richard been a Radical reformer. As has been seen already, Crabbe did not take seriously the views of Radicals and Dissenters, and believed that they represented only a fringe movement.¹⁰² He seems to have been confident that England would steer a slow and steady course between the rocks of anarchy and tyranny.

When applied to social circumstances however, Crabbe's advocacy of conciliation seems much more creditable and open-minded, for his presentation has indicated that Richard, as a member of the lower classes, is different from George and has something positive to contribute. In fact throughout the poem, it is the lower class people who generally manage to find happiness, and who therefore have something to offer the upper classes. For instance, William Bailey and Frances enjoy a happy marriage. And of course Richard makes the ideal marriage, not George. Moreover the lower classes have the experience to instruct the upper classes: Farmer Ellis instructs Sir Owen Dale; Ruth's mother condemns the press gangs; and the gamekeepers teach the squire that men are more valuable than partridges and hares. Crabbe seems to have felt that knowledge, wealth and refinement tended to dull an individual's "pure" responses to life. Lady Barbara and her brother are "Above the

¹⁰² Crabbe's letter to Miss Charter, February 11, 1817. See above, p. 569.

vulgar, as we judged, in mind, / Below in peace, more sad as more refined" (XVI. 539-540). In giving Richard the instinctive ability to know what is good and valuable -- "frankly he joined the free" -- Crabbe has actually tilted the balance between the brothers in his favour. At the end of the poem George admits that he cannot live without his brother. At a time when the upper classes were being exhorted to help the poor, Crabbe sets out, supposedly to show yet another example of this charity, only to reveal unexpectedly that it is not the rich who can help the poor, but the poor who can aid the rich. Not Richard, but George, requires charity.

It is possible to argue that in Tales of the Hall Crabbe has presented a picture of man that denies the possibility of social criticism since he shows that all ideas -- liberal and conservative alike -- are the result of hidden motives rather than well-reasoned convictions. In Tale X of Tales, he commented, "Our feelings still upon our views attend, / And their own natures to the objects lend" (Tale X. 10-11). Political creeds and philosophies of life, he feels, are often no more than elaborate disguises to hide the real motives and causes for man's actions. Yet Crabbe has also shown that because man's beliefs are so much at the mercy of forces he does not understand, he must learn an attitude of tolerance. And this belief in the primary need for tolerance has enormous repercussions on his approach to social and political problems.

In Crabbe's view the most important requirement for a healthy country was not a particular programme of social reform, but men of good-will who would respect the opinions of others and

allow their own beliefs to be scrutinized so that the least prejudiced solution could be reached. Of course such a response does not solve any problems in political science; one can still ask on what basis certain people are chosen as "men of good-will" and others excluded. Moreover the question remains, who is to make the choice. One might also ask if Crabbe's answer is not as much conditioned by hidden motives as that of the conservative and the revolutionary. Crabbe, I suspect, would be the first person to accept this objection; but on the other hand, he is not offering a solution to problems, but a method which could possibly yield solutions.

More important still, he does not advance the method in terms of logical argument, but by giving the reader a "feel" for the ordinary rhythms of events and happenings in the everyday world. In Mrs. Haddakin's phrase, Crabbe has the uncanny ability of "possessing the reader's consciousness"¹⁰³ to reveal afresh the profound in the ordinary. Yet in the last analysis Crabbe's belief -- that everyone would basically agree if they were permitted to study problems in a spirit of conciliation -- is not so much offered as an answer, as a testament of his faith in the sanity and soundness of the nation as a whole -- a tempered optimism which Crabbe defended in the face of seemingly overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

¹⁰³Lilian Haddakin, The Poetry of Crabbe, p. 167.

heard in Crabbe's work, were not as serious as those for the same reason that men did not suffer, because they were not...
 to say that Crabbe is not a social reformer, for he may not have been a social reformer, but he may contain much of the social comment on the social conditions of his time. For by his interest in social matters he has been a social reformer.

CONCLUSION

Since my aim in this study has been to offer a detailed examination of Crabbe's poems in order to reveal Crabbe's complex treatment of social subjects, it would be ill-advised to attempt to "sum up" Crabbe's achievement. The intention has been to re-open rather than to close the subject. However something perhaps can be said in a general way about Crabbe's relation to his age. In his recent book Romanticism and the Social Order, R.W. Harris has asserted that Crabbe "was not a social reformer."¹ Although one might wish to quibble, and point out that Crabbe advocates reform in Book XXI of Tales of the Hall ("Smugglers and Poachers") as well as in several sketches of The Borough and "The Parish Register," on the whole Harris' comment is just. Reformers such as Thomas Paine and William Cobbett discussed the evils of the workhouse and the game laws for the express purpose of demanding change. While the crusading voice of the social reformer is occasionally

¹R.W. Harris, Romanticism and the Social Order, p. 12.

heard in Crabbe's work, more often he describes abuses for the same reason that men climb mountains, because they are there.

As with Byron's Adeline, however, one finds it easier to say what Crabbe is not than what he is. While he may not have been a social reformer, his poetry contains much observation and comment on the social conditions of the time. Possibly his interest in social subjects is best encompassed in the comprehensive term "social critic." Moreover, that Crabbe rarely attempted to utilize his verse as an instrument of propaganda says something for his artistic integrity. Crabbe disliked the "book of instruction," no matter how well-intentioned, masquerading as literature. He once wrote to his son:

I saw at Mr. Waldron's a Religious-Novel a Species of Writing which I can neither love nor commend[.] The Author prates about the Danger of reading Shakespear Othello for Instance & yet publishes a Story -- a religious Story to instruct & amuse at our time.

Many of the writers that attempted social descriptions subordinated their creative impulses to the social message. One has only to compare the idealized characters in Hannah More's The History of Tom White, the Post-Boy -- a story which tells of the difficult times in the long, cold winter of 1795, and which praises sobriety, frugality, and self-help -- with Crabbe's portraits in "Resentment" (Tale XVII, Tales) to understand the difference in artistic achievement. When we turn from the conservatives such as Hannah More to the Radicals of the time, the same emphasis upon

²Letter to George, February 28, 1826. In the John Murray MS Collection.

dogma is discovered. Shelley's poetry is never more didactic and tendentious than when he describes a particular social problem. In poems such as Rosalind and Helen, The Revolt of Islam and Prometheus Unbound, Shelley clearly states his advocacy of the overthrow of existing corrupt institutions. Even where Shelley manages to preach with great beauty and conviction, one is always aware, as in a sermon, that in the beginning there is theory.

If we look to other writers for comparison, we find that Coleridge and Keats rarely discuss social themes in their creative work. Jane Austen deals almost wholly with the personal attitudes and values of the gentry. John Galt (seriously under-rated as a novelist) comments on social problems, but only in passing. Byron, of course, devotes the last five cantos of Don Juan to satirizing English life, but as he says himself, he plays "upon the surface of humanity." Wordsworth in some of his shorter poems, such as Michael and "The last of the Flock," manages to allude to changing patterns of social life in a creative manner, but he offers only a limited view of the problems -- for instance the exodus of the peasantry to the cities -- although he gives an excellent portrayal of the effect of these changes on individuals. When he presents a detailed account of social problems, as in The Excursion, he does so in a discursive and didactic vein. Peacock, of course, brings a whole host of different social problems into his novels, but for the most part his characters discuss or represent in caricature these ideas rather than live them out.³

³Nightmare Abbey is perhaps the exception.

When we turn to Crabbe's poetry, however, we find that he often wrote about social conditions not to prove or disprove a social or political theory, but because he liked to describe the world around him accurately and minutely. Moreover he realized that his closely observed sketches, objective though they might be, carried implications as radical as Shelley's prophecies. Crabbe's iconoclastic attitude towards the settled views of the world is voiced clearly in The Village and continues throughout his poetry. Much of the creative pressure behind Tales of the Hall stems from his desire to show man as he really is, and not as the "poet" would have us imagine. In his early poem "Midnight," Crabbe stated that a poet of humble birth like himself, "Hallows a Clod, and spurns Immensity" (line 128); in his later poetry he often manages to invest the particular with a significance that caused his contemporaries to look afresh at society around them. Crabbe realized that the Gothic novelists and poets in their descriptions of exotic and supernatural lands were attempting to explore the realm of the imagination, but he felt they were on the wrong track. As he said in The Borough, these books "which promise much of life to give, / . . . show so little how we truly live" (XX. 15-16). To know more about mankind Crabbe felt that one had to explore the lives of ordinary people. They would reveal "more of grievous, base, and dreadful things, / Than novelists relate or poet sings" (XX. 23-24). As Byron once commented, the world would be changed overnight, if artists would only dare to show the true springs of human action:

The new world would be nothing to the old,
 If some Columbus of the moral seas
 Would show mankind their souls' antipodes.⁴

It is interesting to note that Byron felt Crabbe was one of the few contemporary poets on the right track. He commented, "Crabbe's the man, but he has got a coarse and impracticable subject."⁵

To see Crabbe as an early "naturalistic" writer, however, is a mistake. The late eighteenth century revival of moral seriousness certainly left its mark on him. Perhaps because of his position in the Church of England or simply because of his temperament, Crabbe was seriously concerned that a work of art should not have an immoral emphasis or subvert communal values. Yet as we have seen already, Crabbe was by no means the usual type of moralist. For one thing he admitted his incompetence to decide the great issues of the day. Even on such a major issue as parliamentary reform, his mind was uncommitted.⁶ Crabbe was not uninterested in these subjects, but his ability to see both sides of a question often left him with the feeling that the country lacked the means and resources (as it did) to overcome the problems with which it was faced. On the subject of working men's combinations, he wrote to Miss Hoare:

I am sorry for the want of Sufficient Work
 for the Willing and Industrious, and like you,
 I lament the use, and still more the increase,
 of Machinery; yet what can be done? Other

⁴Don Juan XIV, ci.

⁵Letter to John Murray, September 14, 1817, in The Works, "Letters," IV, 169-170.

⁶See above, p. 569.

Countries not so burdened with debt as we are contend with us: they also make Cloth and Birmingham Wares, and we are told that to lay aside our Inventions is to give up our Trade. God knows what will be the result of such Dilemmas, where on one side, the Masters feel the Necessity of employing Agents who do not eat or drink, and on the other the men who are hungry and thirsty, threaten, and no wonder, their Rival the machines with utter Destruction. Who can truly say, if I were a master I would give up Machinery, if I were a workman I would starve in quiet? I leave the melancholy subject. A way will be found, though my Wisdom is at a loss where to look for it. The Mule would not be tollerated in this Neighbourhood, and yet it is a sad thing to check and baffle Ingenuity, though a worse to do this by Hunger joined with a will to labour⁷

Yet in those cases where only individuals were concerned, Crabbe easily made up his mind. On the issue of workers' rights, he had no difficulty in siding with the workers against the masters.

He wrote to his son:

There is . . . a combination among workmen respecting wages to which every man is sworn to secrecy, which renders it unlawful, for the mere combination does not, nor ought it, for if masters may combine to fix what they will give, servants should be allowed to make agreements concerning what they will take, but the oaths and the secrecy are not to be justified.⁸

And as his son has commented, Crabbe "was anxious for the education

⁷Letter to Miss Hoare, January 27, 1829, in The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 293.

⁸Letter to his son George, December 14, 1828. Quoted from Huchon, p. 463, n. 2.

of the humbler classes."⁹

One suspects that when Crabbe was in the process of creating his characters or describing the landscape he allowed his own sympathies free rein. Possibly Shelley's description of how he wrote Rosalind and Helen would also apply to Crabbe:

I resigned myself, as I wrote, to the impulse
of the feelings which moulded the conception
of the story.¹⁰

Yet Shelley could achieve this because he usually described an ideal world. Where Shelley could state as an abstract truth, "Love makes all things equal,"¹¹ Crabbe's attempts to describe the world led him to show:

Yet high and low, you see, forbear to mix;
No beggars' eyes the heart of kings transfix;
And who but am'rous peers or nobles sigh
When titled beauties pass triumphant by?
(Tales VII. 202-205)

Thus one finds in Crabbe's poetry a curious mixture of conservative principle -- he wished in theory to uphold social standards -- and liberal practice -- he almost always sympathized with the individual in his struggle for freedom of expression. Very often the response

⁹Life, Ch. ix, p. 261. At this period when almost everyone claimed to support some degree of reform it is often difficult to distinguish between those people who wanted the poor to be given every opportunity to better their station and those who wanted to keep the poor in their station, but to make their lives less onerous by administering relief. A good touchstone to help determine which of the two types of "reform" a person advocated is his attitude towards working men's combinations and education. Southey, for instance, greatly feared combinations. Hannah More believed that the lower classes should be taught only the Scriptures.

¹⁰The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, p. 167.

¹¹Epipsychidion line 126, in The Complete Poetical Works, p. 414.

engendered in the reader by a particular poem or character is quite different from, or even diametrically opposed to, what Crabbe says it should be. Crabbe's poems contain what I have called different "voices." Occasionally one voice only is present, as in "Peter Grimes," and there the reader does not encounter this conflict, but is allowed to reach his own conclusions solely on the basis of what he sees of the characters. What gives Crabbe's work so much complexity and interest is the constant conflict to uphold the rights of the individual while never admitting that the individual's experience might serve as a precedent for social action. Through all his work one finds that while he allows his own emotions and sensibility to mould the poem for a time, he then reverses direction with the reminder that individual experience cannot be allowed to create its own values entirely but must be judged finally by the normal moral code established by tradition and tested against the facts of everyday existence. Crabbe was firmly convinced that one can never deduce what ought to be from what is. The man who is "disposed to draw / His rules from reason's and from nature's law" (The Borough XVII. 180-181) is for Crabbe a constant source of irony and tragedy.

Howard Mills, in his criticism of Crabbe's tale "Edward Shore" on the grounds that "it takes refuge in moral abstractions and dogmatism," has advanced the view that the "only authentic kind of judgement is that which is implicit in the response itself."¹²

¹²Peacock: his Circle and his Age, p. 57.

While Crabbe might have agreed with Dr. Mills's criticism of "Edward Shore," I doubt whether he would have agreed with his definition of good literature; it contains the assumption that the artist has a special licence to write a "work of art," the implications of which are possibly unknown, and against which neither the artist nor the reader is allowed to bring "outside" values. Plato, it will be recalled, banished the artist from the Republic because he believed this "artistic ethic" to be uncontrollable and therefore dangerous. Crabbe took his responsibility both to art and society seriously; his poems manifest his concern to describe creatively what is as well as to illustrate those principles deemed socially valuable. Placed in the same dilemma many artists stifled one impulse or the other and wrote either "escapist" fiction or "propagandist" tracts. Crabbe cannot be said to have solved the problem in all of his poems; often he leans to one side or the other. Yet many times he manages to dissolve the problem by incorporating the conflict within the structure of his poems. He advances "sidelong" in a "crooked race."

APPENDIX 1

GEORGE CRABBE, THE DUKE OF RUTLAND AND THE TORIES

I

One of the most curious incidents in Crabbe's life was his unexpected appointment as chaplain to the Duke of Rutland. As is well known, Burke first obtained for Crabbe the position of curate in his native town of Aldborough, and when this arrangement proved unsatisfactory, he secured for him the chaplaincy to the Duke of Rutland. Crabbe's son has commented several times in his Life that Crabbe was unhappy at Belvoir Castle because he felt himself unable to take part in the social duties expected of a ducal chaplain.¹ A second reason often given to explain Crabbe's unhappiness at Belvoir is that his political and social views were opposed to those of the company at Belvoir. A typical view, and certainly an influential one, is that of René Huchon, when he states that Crabbe held "Liberal opinions" and often had to defend "Burke, Fox and the Whig party

¹Life, Ch. v.

against the Duke of Rutland, a fervent admirer of Pitt, and against the Duchess herself, the most uncompromising of Tories."² Huchon believed that Crabbe was a "Whig" and that his position at Belvoir was made uncomfortable for him because he was often at odds over politics with the Duke and Duchess.

Critics have often developed the thesis of Crabbe's being a "Liberal" in the "Tory" house of the Duke of Rutland as a possible explanation for various elements in his early poems. For instance, in his examination of The Newspaper Robert Chamberlain attributes Crabbe's reason for writing the poem to the recent election (the general election of 1784), where the party led by Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke, with the Duke of Portland as its nominal leader, had been roundly defeated by Pitt and the Duke of Rutland. Chamberlain feels that Crabbe "felt impelled to offer his patron public testimony of his own sympathy."³ However when Chamberlain turns to The Newspaper itself, he appears somewhat surprised and a little disconcerted to find that the poem does not in fact contain any public testimony to Burke. Chamberlain's belief that the poem contained a public testimony was based on the assumption that Crabbe was a Whig and that he would naturally wish to help Burke. When Chamberlain can find no such testimony he hastens to explain that Crabbe was a Whig who was living under the roof of the Tory Duke of Rutland. He asks: "Just what, though, could the moderately liberal chaplain in the Tory

²Huchon, p. 142.

³Robert L. Chamberlain, George Crabbe, p. 54.

household of the Duke of Rutland have to say about the defeat of a Radical Whig?" And Chamberlain gleefully answers his own question: "Not very much."⁴ The argument is circular and self-defeating, and for this reason alone, one would have thought that critics might have seen fit to question the original premise -- the conflict of politics between George Crabbe and the House of Rutland.

More important still, this belief that Crabbe's politics were opposed to those of the Duke of Rutland has been used by critics as an explanation of the different sentiments in the two books of The Village. At first sight such a theory seems tempting, for The Village was begun when Crabbe was an impoverished London poet and finished after he had become a ducal chaplain. In Crabbe's own words, "a considerable portion" was written under the supervision of Edmund Burke.⁵ Thus if there had been political differences between Crabbe and Rutland, it would seem only natural for Crabbe to attempt to mute any offensive political overtones in the poem. It is not my intention to dispute that Crabbe's changed circumstances -- from a destitute poet in London to the chaplain of one of the peers of the first rank -- probably gave rise to some change in his attitudes and ideas. When he became chaplain to the Duke of Rutland Crabbe's experience of life suddenly broadened; it would have been odd if his outlook had not changed. But critics have also suggested that Crabbe altered and suppressed his political ideals in order to avoid offending the Duke of Rutland. This is a much more dubious proposition.

⁴Robert L. Chamberlain, p. 54.

⁵"Autobiographical Sketch," in The New Monthly Magazine, IV (1815), 514.

I wish to examine the evidence for the long-held belief that Crabbe's political and social views were opposed to those of the Duke of Rutland, and then to decide whether Crabbe's position at Belvoir caused him to mute or disclaim his "Liberal" ideas.

The first thing to note is the vagueness of the phraseology chosen by critics concerned with the question. A definitive answer (either "yes" or "no") to whether Crabbe's "Liberal" ideas were opposed to the "Tory" principles of the Duke of Rutland, presupposes that the question is precisely stated. But in the political framework of the 1780's the meanings of the terms "Tory" and "Whig," and for that matter "liberal" and its counterpart, presumably "conservative," are not easily explained and do not allow of simple definitions. No critic of English literature interested in the relationship of literature to the politics of the eighteenth century can afford to ignore the scholarship which has followed in the wake of Sir Lewis Namier's book The Structure Of Politics at the Accession of George III (1929).⁶ Namier gave the timely warning that political parties in the eighteenth century were a different species from those of the twentieth. On this question, Namier has said: "The political life of the period could be fully described without ever using a party denomination,"⁷ and that, "there were no proper party

⁶ Some of the major works related to this discussion are Richard Pares, King George III and the Politicians (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1953); Donald Grove Barnes, George III and William Pitt, 1783-1806 (Stanford University Press, 1939); Ian R. Christie, The End of North's Ministry 1780-1782 (London, 1958).

⁷ Sir Lewis Namier, The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III, rev. ed. (London, 1957), p. xi.

organizations about 1760, though party names and cant were current."⁸ Such warnings should have cautioned literary critics from placing too much trust in the terms Whig and Tory. Historians such as Namier and Richard Pares have shown conclusively that in the period from 1760-1784 a description of English political life in terms of a two-party system is impossible. Not only were there more than two "parties" in English politics at this time, but the use of the word "party" is itself suspect.

In the present day a political party is easily recognized by various signs. Generally it will have a defined programme of action, an organizing committee, a group of people who are recognized as its policy makers, a leader, and membership cards. If this idea if a party is extrapolated into the eighteenth century (as several Crabbe scholars seem to have done) the politics of this time will be badly distorted. The idea of a Whig party opposing a Tory party, each with its own set of principles, does not describe eighteenth century politics with its numerous groups of politicians, loosely held together under one man or one house, and jockeying for power in a scramble to form coalitions. In the eighteenth century there was no Tory party. From their attitudes to topics such as King and Church, certain people could be loosely described as having Tory beliefs, but such people did not constitute an organized political party.

Namier and Richard Pares have both pointed out that through-

⁸The Structure of Politics, p. x.

out the eighteenth century men entered parliament, by and large, not because they wished to promote the public weal through a definite set of policies, but because the letters "M.P." after their names were an added distinction, a distinction which entitled them to a part of the spoils of government patronage. To speak of Whigs and Tories in Queen Anne's reign is not unprofitable, because at the beginning of the century the terms signified at least an attitude towards foreign policy.⁹ But after the year 1745, when hopes of the Stuart cause were crushed, this distinction disappeared. After the retreat from Derby, politics became a matter of gaining position in His Majesty's Government. Men formed themselves into little groups, such as those under Rockingham, Bedford, Grenville, and Rutland, so as to be able to obtain a position under the ministry formed from whatever coalition was in power. Thus to speak of Whigs and Tories at this time can be misleading if it presupposes two different political parties. If the terms Whig and Tory are retained, as indeed it seems impossible not to refer to them, one should understand that these words do not designate two opposing political parties, each attempting to set up a government based on their own party programmes. On this question of Whigs and Tories, Horace Walpole said, "In truth all the sensible Tories I ever knew were either Jacobites or became Whigs; those that remained Tories remained fools,"¹⁰ a comment substantiated by many eminent historians of this century.

⁹See J.H. Plumb, The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675-1725 (London, 1967), Ch. v.

¹⁰Horace Walpole, Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Third, ed. G.F. Russell Barker (London, 1894), I, 192.

To call Rutland a Tory does not elucidate matters. "Tory" was largely an abusive word, not one which designated a set of policies. Certainly the Dukes of Rutland were never Jacobites, and the industrious perseverance of Crabbe's patron, Charles fourth Duke of Rutland, as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, hardly leaves him in the category of fools. What is required is a summary of the Duke of Rutland's political views to determine whether it might have been necessary for Crabbe to alter his social ideals to conform to those of Rutland.

II

When discussing the politics of the Duke of Rutland, one should bear in mind that up until the time he was made Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1784, he was not keenly engaged in politics. Often he was away from London during parliamentary sessions, preferring to spend his time at Cheveley or Belvoir. During the years immediately preceding the fall of Lord North's ministry, the Marquess of Rockingham had often to write urgent notes requesting the Duke to attend the House, even at times of crucial divisions. A few days before one very important division, the Duke and several of his friends left London for Belvoir; the pleasures of the country seemed

more important than matters of parliamentary policy.¹¹ Rockingham and Burke many times regretted that the Duke seemed more the country gentleman spurning London politics, than a devoted member of parliament. Of course the Duke's lack of concern for parliamentary business does not mean that he was uninterested in the political matters of borough influence; as a great peer he was naturally anxious to establish his influence with the leaders of the government, for this was an effective means of ensuring patronage both for himself and his friends.

The Duke's interest in government, especially in the years up to 1782, was devoted mostly to the business of retaining his family influence in boroughs and counties so that he could obtain seats for his friends. Rutland was not accounted a man of great parliamentary ability;¹² indeed, he rarely spoke in parliament. In 1776 Rockingham wrote to the Duke (at this time the Marquess of Granby, and in the Commons) attempting to involve him more fervently in politics by requesting him to move the amendment to the Address. He found Granby unwilling to take a leading role:

Your note has agitated me most exceedingly. I conjure you not to decline moving the amendment: it would be a horrid damp to all our friends, who rejoiced so sincerely in the expectation of your being the mover of this important decisive business. . . . My good dear Lord, do not decline this business, on which the hereafter fate of this country may depend.¹³

¹¹Letter from the Marquess of Rockingham to the Marquess of Granby, March 5, 1779. Historical Manuscripts Commission, 14th Report, The Manuscripts of His Grace The Duke of Rutland (London, 1894), III, 17.

¹²See N.W. Wraxall, The Historical and the Posthumous Memoirs, ed. Henry Wheatley (London, 1884), V, 32.

¹³Letter from the Marquess of Rockingham to the Marquess of Granby, October 31, 1776. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 7.

According to Walpole "his youthful diffidence got the better" of him, and in spite of Rockingham's appeal to take the lead in the "important decisive business," he only seconded the motion.¹⁴ When on November 18, 1777, Granby moved the same amendment on America as Chatham did in the Lords,¹⁵ his friends wrote to him encouragingly in the hope that he would now take a greater interest in policy.¹⁶ They were disappointed.

While the Duke may have been diffident about matters of political policy and somewhat lax in attending the House on business, there is no doubt that he inherited a general Whig legacy of ideas and opinions from his father the famous John, Marquess of Granby.¹⁷ Even Kebbel, one of the strongest proponents of the theory that Rutland was a Tory, does not fail to recognize that in the mid-eighteenth century the members of the Manners family were Whigs.¹⁸ Charles, fourth Duke of Rutland, was immensely proud of his aristocratic background, and certainly attempted to follow the traditions of his family. On the other hand he was not prepared to follow blindly any particular party or group of men. In making up his mind which

¹⁴Horace Walpole, The Last Journals of Horace Walpole, ed. A.F. Steuart (London, 1910), I, 580.

¹⁵Rutland MSS. Quoted from Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, The House of Commons 1754-1790 (London, 1964), III, 101.

¹⁶Letter from T. Townshend to the Marquess of Granby, November 28, 1777. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 10-11. And for another example of his friends' urging him to take a greater part in politics, see the letter from Sir Thomas Gascoigne to Rutland, October 18, 1782, HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 63.

¹⁷Ian Christie, The End of North's Ministry, 1780-1782, p. 221.

¹⁸T.E. Kebbel, Life of George Crabbe (London, 1888), p. 45.

policy to support on the all-important question of 1776 -- the American war -- he appears to have been determined to vote, not for a faction, but for that policy which he believed to be right.

Namier comments:

In his first reported speech, 5 Apr. 1775, he stated that so far he had refrained from giving even a silent vote on any American question, as he wished first to hear the arguments on both sides; but now declared his adherence to Chatham's principles; and disavowed the Government's system, as commenced in iniquity, pursued with resentment, and bound to "terminate in nothing but blood. . . it shall, from me, meet the most constant, determined, and invariable opposition."¹⁹

Rutland's opposition to the American war encouraged him to lend his support to Rockingham's policy of opposition to Lord North. Accordingly, Rockingham soon began to call the Duke to his counsels. The closeness of the two men on political questions is suggested by a letter of January 4, 1776, which Rockingham wrote to the Duke to tell him of the victory of one of their candidates at an election:

The result of the election for the borough [of Hedon] was that Watson was elected by a majority of 82. Watson -- 119, Atkinson -- 37. It is a pleasing event in every respect. The eagerness of our friends to prevent the borough falling into the hands of the Ministry adds to my private feelings Many thanks to you and Lord George Sutton.²⁰

Rockingham's use of the phrase "our friends" is evidence that he considered Rutland to be amongst his supporters.

In the following year George Johnstone wrote to the Duke to tell him of a decision taken by his friends and to urge him to be

¹⁹Namier and Brooke, The House of Commons, III, 101. Horace Walpole, who also mentions this speech, felt that Granby's stand against the war was a blow to Lord North. He says, "This speech and declaration were a great disappointment to the Court." The Last Journals of Horace Walpole, I, 455.

²⁰HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 4.

present for the division:

I should not summon you to London without sufficient cause; but I understand from good authority the brunt of the battle will be decided on Tuesday, or Thursday at farthest. "There has been a meeting of Lord Rockingham, Lord Chatham, Lord Shelburne, and their different connections, when a perfect reconciliation and union was settled. Everyone seems for the present most anxious who can promote the general plan most cordially and effectually. I hope your Lordship will not be wanting at such a moment."²¹

Johnstone, whom Namier describes as "the head of a Whig family,"²² certainly believed Rutland to be on his side, linked by natural ties to the other great Whig leaders.

Ian Christie, in his admirable summary of the last years of Lord North's ministry, has given an assessment of the various groups opposing Lord North. He observes that the Rockingham group, with Burke as its spokesman, was the largest and most influential, but it is interesting to notice that amongst the smaller groups attached to Rockingham he lists the group led by the Duke of Rutland. Christie concludes that the Duke of Rutland's group was not wholly under the influence of the Marquess of Rockingham but that it was closely attached.²³

In April 1780 Thomas Thoroton wrote gleefully to Rutland to announce that they had defeated the ministry on Dunning's motion,²⁴

²¹George Johnstone to the Marquess of Granby, November 29, 1777. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 11-12.

²²Namier and Brooke, The House of Commons, II, 686.

²³Ian Christie, The End of North's Ministry 1780-1782, p. 221.

²⁴Dunning's motion was, "that the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished."

which would suggest that he knew Rutland agreed with the Rockingham principle that power should be invested in the cabinet and not in the king. However the extent to which Rutland supported Whig ideas to restrain the power of George III is somewhat in doubt, because he was so often away at times of important divisions. The Marquess of Rockingham remonstrated with him for not being in London to cast his vote on Dunning's resolution. However this lack of voting support may well have been only the result of the Duke's distaste for sitting in the House. Rockingham's many requests to the Duke to attend the House soon had their effect. While Rutland did not journey to London more often, he did send his blank proxy to Rockingham for him to use as he wished. Rockingham wrote him a letter of thanks: "I have also obeyed your commands in regard to sending you a blank proxy, which you will make use of and honour me with if you cannot come up to London."²⁵ Rutland's willingness to give his vote, via blank proxy, is fairly certain evidence that he regarded Rockingham's ideals as coinciding with his own.

Yet if the Duke of Rutland and the Rockingham Whigs were very close in their politics, surely this is evidence which refutes, at least in part, the myth that the Duke's politics were opposed to those of politicians such as Edmund Burke. Burke, it will be recalled, was Rockingham's foremost formulator of policy. In the Life, George Crabbe Jr. expressed some surprise that Edmund Burke had obtained Crabbe the chaplaincy to the Duke of Rutland. The

²⁵Letter from the Marquess of Rockingham to the Duke of Rutland, April 7, 1780. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 28.

following statement reveals that he believed the Duke to be a political opponent of Burke:

My father received a letter²⁶ from Mr. Burke, informing him that, in consequence of some conversation he had held with the Duke of Rutland, that nobleman would willingly receive him as his domestic chaplain at Belvoir Castle, so soon as he could get rid of his existing engagements at Aldborough. This was a very unusual occurrence, such situations in the mansions of that rank being commonly filled either by relations of the noble family itself, or by college acquaintances, or dependants recommended by political service and local attachment. But, in spite of political difference, the recommendation of Burke was all-powerful with the late Duke of Rutland²⁷

Burke probably wrote the letter informing Crabbe of the Duke's willingness to take him on as his domestic chaplain some time in March or April, 1782. The date cannot be established exactly as the letter is now lost, but since Crabbe's reply is extant and dated April 16, 1782, Burke's letter must have been written shortly before this date. The Duke of Rutland formally appointed Crabbe his domestic chaplain in May, 1782.²⁸ At this date Rutland was undoubtedly pleased to help Burke obtain a position for Crabbe, since both the Duke and Burke were supporters of Rockingham. The opposition coalition, which included Rockingham, Fox, Burke, Rutland, Abingdon, Shelburne and the rest of the leaders, lasted intact and firmly opposed to George III until July 1782. Thus Crabbe's son's

²⁶This letter is lost, but Crabbe's reply (April 16, 1782), stating that he had found a successor and that he was coming up to London, is extant. Correspondence of The Right Honourable Edmund Burke, ed. Charles William, Earl Fitzwilliam, et al. (London, 1844), II, 475-476.

²⁷Life, Ch. v, p. 112.

²⁸See George Crabbe's letter to Edmund Burke, May 15, 1782. Crabbe says, "It is my Duty to inform you that His Grace appointed me his domestic Chaplain on Sunday last" The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, ed. Thomas W. Copeland, IV (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 454.

statement that Burke obtained the position for Crabbe "in spite of political difference" is obviously incorrect.

If one remembers that Crabbe's son wrote the Life in 1834, some fifty years after the event in question took place, and that he was not well informed about politics, his mistake can be easily understood. Shortly after Crabbe obtained his position at Belvoir, certain events took place which set Burke and Rutland on opposing political courses. When Rockingham died on July 1, 1782, the King used his constitutional right to offer the lead of the new administration to Shelburne. Fox refused to join, and petulantly withdrew his support. Rutland, who had not been given a place in Rockingham's ministry, was called shortly after by Shelburne to the cabinet. Therefore after July 1782, there is every reason to believe that some antagonism developed between Rutland's party, supporting Shelburne, and people such as Burke, who followed Fox. Indeed a letter from Major Stanhope to Rutland explains how this split developed, and is particularly helpful in clarifying the Duke's position at this complex period of English politics:

Attached to you by friendship, it was my wish and expectation to have adhered to your political principles, which I thought coincided with my own. Under this conviction I came into Parliament by your friendly assistance. We were both attached to the same men and the same measures until the unfortunate separation of those men which took place upon Lord Rockingham's death. You then sent for me and desired me to follow the direction of my own judgment, assuring me that you left me to be guided by my own conviction. Since then, you have never been confidential with me upon political or any other subjects. If you had expressed your wish that I should support Government, I should have had no alternative but to obey or resign my seat. Had you left

me to myself I should have doubted before following my own judgment. But when, unsolicited by me, you proposed in the most unreserved and handsome manner that I should follow Mr. Fox if my principles inclined me to oppose Government, I did not apprehend that I should offend you by so acting. I appeal to your candour to judge of my conduct.²⁹

Stanhope's letter suggests that the Duke did not at first have any strong preference for either the followers of Shelburne or the followers of Fox. He appears to have allowed Stanhope to vote for either Fox or Shelburne. However in the last months of 1782, letters from Shelburne to the Duke of Rutland³⁰ suggest that Shelburne asked the Duke for active support against his rivals Fox and Burke. Stanhope's letter indicates that Rutland decided, sometime in January or February, 1783, to give his entire support to Shelburne against Fox and Burke. The Duke became a member of Lord Shelburne's cabinet on February 14, 1783.³¹ However Burke first opened tentative discussions about the possibility of Crabbe obtaining a place at Belvoir some time around March 1781,³² and as has been seen, he

²⁹Letter from Major H.F.R. Stanhope to the Duke of Rutland, February 15, 1783. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 68.

³⁰HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 64.

³¹Huchon states incorrectly that the Duke was made a minister in December 1782. See p. 143. Namier and Brooke, in The House of Commons, III, 101, give the correct date, February 1783.

³²Burke must have intimated something on the subject to Crabbe at this time, since Crabbe, in his poem The Library, pays a compliment to Rutland. Crabbe says that the poor man is fortunate who can find: "Some noble RUTLAND, Misery's friend and thine" (line 670). The Library was published on July 24, 1781. Crabbe mentioned this allusion to Rutland in his letter to Burke of March 27, 1781: "If the line wherein the Duke of Rutland is indirectly mentioned, be such as would offend his grace, or if you disapprove it, -- it is almost unnecessary, I hope, to say it shall be immediately altered." See Correspondence of Edmund Burke, ed. Earl Fitzwilliam, II, 415.

obtained the position for Crabbe in May 1782 -- long before the political differences between Burke and Rutland arose.

While Crabbe's biographers were wrong in stating that the Duke and Crabbe had always been opposed, and they were wrong in their belief that Burke obtained Crabbe's position "in spite of political difference," they were correct in pointing out that during Crabbe's period as domestic chaplain to the Duke, some political antagonism existed between Burke and Rutland. It is important to determine, therefore, the nature of the political differences in order to ascertain whether these differences would have affected Crabbe. Both Crabbe's son and Huchon have maintained that since the Duke was a Tory, his political and social ideas would have been antagonistic to what Crabbe believed as a follower of the Whigs. What I hope to show is that the political differences between Rutland and Burke were almost wholly the result of power and personality struggles. This is not an attempt to gloss over the political differences between Burke and the Duke of Rutland after February 1783, but to show that they were not based on any fundamental difference of policy.

The ultimate question under discussion is whether Crabbe's own ideas and his poetry were muted because of the Duke's political beliefs. Biographers have been in agreement that the Duke treated Crabbe with affection and respect, so that the question is not one of personal animosities. What needs clarification is whether political tensions and animosities arose. It is my contention that once the nature of the Duke's political affiliations are understood,

the outdated notion of the Duke belonging to a "Tory party," with policies opposed to those of Burke's "Whig party" can be discarded.

To understand why Rutland supported Shelburne against Fox after Rockingham's death, one must introduce his connection with William Pitt the younger. The Duke of Rutland's admiration for Chatham led him to seek the opportunity of meeting Chatham's son,³³ and a friendship grew up between them. At the general election of 1780 the Duke supported Pitt for the candidature of one of the two seats at Cambridge University. When Pitt failed to win this seat, the Duke's influence with Sir James Lowther (afterwards Lord Lonsdale) gained for him in 1781 the pocket borough of Appleby. In helping Pitt to obtain a seat the Duke believed he had found yet another follower. Pitt wrote to him: "Let me rather hope that I shall have the satisfaction of fighting under your banner in the cause to which we are alike attached, and of proving to the world how much I know the value and feel the honour of such a connection."³⁴ Within a short time, however, the Duke found he had recruited not a follower, but a leader.

The "cause" to which Pitt referred in his letter to the Duke was the endeavour to end the American war and defeat Lord North's ministry. Pitt's entry into the House as a member of Rutland's group gave welcome support to Rockingham's opposition to the war, and his demands for economic reform.

³³In his first reported speech, the Duke said that he was a follower of "Chatham's principles." See above, p. 642.

³⁴Letter from William Pitt to the Duke of Rutland, March 9, 1781. Correspondence Between the Right Honble. William Pitt and Charles Duke of Rutland, ed. John Duke of Rutland (Edinburgh & London, 1890), p. 2.

However Rockingham's death on July 1, 1782, proved the crucial turning point in Rutland's political life. At this time the House was split into various factions, none of which could form a strong ministry on its own. Of the 558 members, approximately 140 followed the leadership of Shelburne, 120 followed Lord North and about 90 followed Charles James Fox. Some two hundred members were left unattached who could be swayed by the oratory of the House of Commons.³⁵ Shelburne soon discovered that his administration was likely to remain weak for some time. Fox had refused to cooperate and Shelburne found a coalition with the conservative forces of North distasteful. In these circumstances Shelburne decided to elevate Pitt to Chancellor of the Exchequer. Soon after, Pitt advised Shelburne that his old patron the Duke of Rutland might prove a useful ally. Whereas Rutland had first gained Pitt his seat in the House, eighteen months later it was Pitt who helped Rutland to a seat in Shelburne's ministry.

However the policies of Shelburne, Rutland and Pitt were not wholly opposed to those of Fox and Burke. In February 1783, Pitt and Shelburne, realizing that they needed further support in the House, approached Fox once again to join them. "Neither Mr. Pitt nor lord Shelburne saw any reason, why they should not act with Mr. Fox."³⁶ Pitt personally asked Fox to join them. Fox's question was whether Shelburne would remain as First Lord of the

³⁵This summary is taken from Gibbon's calculation. Quoted from J. Steven Watson, The Reign of George III, p. 250.

³⁶George Tomline, Memoirs of the Life of The Right Honorable William Pitt, 2nd ed. (London, 1821), I, 89.

Treasury. And when Pitt replied that he would, Fox declared again that he would not join any ministry under Shelburne. Pitt is alleged to have replied that "he did not come to betray lord Shelburne."³⁷ Tomline notes: "This was, I believe, the last time Mr. Pitt was in a private room with Mr. Fox; and from this period may be dated that political hostility, which continued through the remainder of their days."³⁸ Shortly after this meeting between Pitt and Fox, Shelburne resigned (March 31, 1783), and after six weeks of hesitation on George III's part, the Fox-North coalition was formed. Pitt and Rutland retired into opposition.

The important thing to note about these parliamentary shifts of power is that they were based on group loyalties and personalities. Rutland decided to join Shelburne and Pitt because he was a friend of Pitt. To a certain degree of course Pitt and Fox differed in their ideas of the way the government should be run. Pitt stood for non-party politics and an administration composed of all patriotic men in service to the king; Fox wished to introduce a system of party politics which would ultimately force the king to bow to the demands of his ministers. Yet when Pitt and Fox disagreed, the issue was not one of policy but one of men. If Fox and Pitt had not parted over the issue of Lord Shelburne, then probably they would have quarrelled over something else; there was too sharp a personality difference between the "black animal" and the cool,

³⁷George Tomline, I, 89.

³⁸George Tomline, I, 89.

rational Pitt. They would never have been able to work together. When Pitt formed his ministry in December, 1783, with the Duke of Rutland as Lord Privy Seal, this was not a different kind of ministry from that Fox would have formed. As George Barnes has commented, "Pitt was merely one more Whig who was willing to become First Lord of the Treasury for George III. This ministry, like practically every one between 1760 and 1783, was a coalition, since it was composed of Pitt's Whig followers, the King's Friends, and Tories."³⁹ Attempts by the St. Albans group were still being made as late as February, 1784, to bring Pitt and Fox together,⁴⁰ and if Pitt had not been so sure of his own abilities to rule, he might well have joined with Fox.

Crabbe's biographers have attempted to make Pitt and the Duke of Rutland followers of the policy of some mythical Tory party, in opposition to Fox and Burke who were supposed to follow the tenets of the Whig party. But this is utter nonsense. The main distinction between Fox and Shelburne was that Fox believed in organized political groups whereas Shelburne wanted a strong executive in which all members gave their patriotic allegiance to the king. Shelburne was anxious to bring Foxites and Northites into his administration, but as individuals, not groups. That Pitt and Rutland finally gained power while Fox remained in the wilderness,

³⁹George Barnes, George III and William Pitt, p. 24.

⁴⁰See Pitt's comment to Rutland: "The independents are still indefatigable for coalition, but as ineffectual as ever." Letter to the Duke of Rutland, February 17, 1784. Correspondence between Pitt and the Duke of Rutland, p. 7.

was simply the outcome of political intrigue. If Pitt had been included in the Rockingham government of 1782, or if Fox had not disliked Shelburne, then Pitt, Rutland, Burke and Fox might have remained together as one group. Such conjectures are of course not to be taken seriously, but even the possibility of the suggestion indicates that Rutland and Fox were not nearly so far apart in their political thinking as Crabbe's biographers would have one believe.

When the Duke of Rutland gave his full support to Shelburne against Fox and Burke in the early part of 1783, he did not change any of his political ideals. He did not suddenly embrace a new set of political beliefs -- an illusory set of "Tory" policies. The names of Burke and Fox would not have been as popular at Belvoir as they once had been, and Crabbe may have found himself in some difficult or embarrassing positions after February 1783 when the company at Belvoir might discuss his patron Edmund Burke as "the enemy."⁴¹ No doubt he would not have relished political conversations in which Burke was discussed in these terms. But this does not in any way imply that Crabbe would have had to restrict his own political and social ideas. The Duke remained constant to his political ideals; so did Burke. The only difference was that they were now separated by a personality struggle.

⁴¹After 1784 Pitt often uses this phrase "the enemy" to describe the opposition led by Fox. See Correspondence between Pitt and the Duke of Rutland.

III

A curious feature of the many attempts to assert a tie between Crabbe's poetry and the politics of the Duke of Rutland is that critics have ignored Crabbe's lack of interest in politics. The poems of this time -- The Village, The Library, The Newspaper and The Candidate -- never touch upon politics. The title "The Candidate" may have a political ring but Crabbe is referring not to political candidates but to poetic ones. Confusion has arisen because Crabbe's social ideas have been given a political interpretation. The question of reform played an important part in the political discussions of the years 1780-1785 and the belief has arisen (and still seems to linger among literary critics) that one political party, the Whigs, supported progressive measures, while the other party, the Tories, attempted to resist all changes in the representation of parliament or in the living conditions of the poor. Even René Huchon, usually a scrupulous scholar, has been led astray by this notion of a two-party system. The cause of the error is easily understandable. One has only to observe the ambiguity of the terms employed. Huchon believed that Crabbe's early life in Aldborough and London, where he experienced poverty, had given him "Liberal opinions" and that he had to defend these opinions against the "Tory" house of Belvoir.⁴²

The word "Liberal" is especially vague when applied to people during this period of the 1780's, for it has many meanings. Whereas Burke's support of Roman Catholic emancipation would class

⁴²See above, pp. 633-634.

him as a liberal, his refusal to countenance an increase in the representation of parliament would make him in modern terms a conservative. Shelburne, on the other hand, supported reform of parliament but was against Catholic emancipation. A person such as Horace Walpole might wish to see the government give greater aid to the poor, but he could hardly favour Burke's "liberal" bill to reduce sinecures when his own income rested on them. At this period of British history (1775-1785), almost everyone was imbued with the critical spirit towards some aspect of political and social life; reform was in the air and the nation as a whole was enthusiastic for change. What Huchon has done (and this is not really his fault, since he is following the interpretation given by the history books of his time) is to erect an artificial polarity between the concepts "Tory" and "Liberal." But the word "Liberal" when applied to eighteenth century conditions cannot be associated with any one party as it can in the nineteenth century, when the Liberal party was actually more progressive than its opposite, the Conservative party. Various literary critics have fastened the label "Tory" to the Duke of Rutland, and then used this label to conjure up a story that the Duke was displeased with Crabbe's social concerns. Yet even if the Duke had been a Tory, in the years 1775-1785 this would be no reason to assume that he was opposed to electoral reform and attempts to better the conditions of the labouring poor.

Crabbe would have found much to admire in the Duke of Rutland's humanitarian interests, and there is no reason to suspect that the Duke did not welcome his chaplain's sympathy for the under-

privileged. The Duke's generosity, both among his friends and the people of the working class, is well documented. In Ireland he gained an excellent reputation as a firm but humanitarian governor. Soon after his arrival there, the Duke sent £1,000 to help the manufacturing poor. The Archbishop of Armagh wrote to thank him:

I have received your draft for 1,000 l., and shall distribute the money, as you direct, for the benefit of poor manufacturers in the different parishes. A donation of this kind must be understood to proceed from a friendly disposition to the welfare of this country.⁴³

No doubt such alms-giving could be construed as a purely political move to appease the people of Ireland, to show that the new governor was kindly disposed towards them. But even if the £1,000 is seen in this light, one cannot deny that Rutland understood the importance of the people, of keeping them happy. Many governors would have dealt with an unruly populace by bringing out the military; Rutland attempted to win them over with kind actions. Recognizing that the poor also needed legislative aid, Rutland attempted to ease some of the taxes. In a private letter to his secretary, he made a special plea that the condition of the poor should be improved:

I hope the Legislature will in the next session take the grievances of the poor into their consideration, and, if possible, give them redress. The two great points which press are the tithes and the hearth-money. I desire you will turn them in your thoughts, and see if any effectual substitution occurs to you.⁴⁴

⁴³Letter from Archbishop of Armagh to the Duke of Rutland, February 29, 1784. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 77.

⁴⁴Letter from the Duke of Rutland to Mr. Orde, July 20, 1786. Correspondence between Pitt and the Duke of Rutland, p. 157.

Rutland's interest in the poor and sympathy for their hardships must have pleased Crabbe, and certainly could not have caused any of the tension between them which Crabbe's son notes.

Because of their fixation with the Duke of Rutland's "Tory" beliefs, literary critics have never bothered to look closely at Rutland's political opinions; instead they have assumed that he must have been opposed to all reform measures. Yet when one turns to consider Rutland's opinions on the question of reform, he is found to be eminently liberal. His refusal to join the Fox-North coalition of April 1783 gave him a high reputation in the eyes of Reformers. When Fox formed this "infamous coalition" with Lord North in order to defeat Shelburne and gain power many reformers saw this as a sell-out.⁴⁵ Fox, Burke and the other Whigs had campaigned against North for years on the basis that North was opposed to reform. Pitt declared angrily that he knew of "a just impediment" why the union should not take place. Wyvill was particularly angry at Fox's behavior and wrote an indignant letter to the York Courant: "It is evident, that if the Coalition can keep their ground, all attempts to restore the constitution must be defeated: for . . . it appears that the bulk of the Whig nobles now in power have agreed the matter

⁴⁵ Richard Watson was one of those appalled by what he felt to be lack of principle in Fox's formation of the coalition: "From the moment this coalition was formed between Lord North and the men who had for many years reprobated, in the strongest terms, his political principles, I lost all confidence in public men. I had, through life, been a strenuous supporter of the principles of the Revolution, and had attached myself, in some degree, to that party which professed to act upon them: but in their coalescing with the Tories to turn out Lord Shelburne, they destroyed my opinion of their disinterestedness and integrity. I clearly saw that they sacrificed their public principles to private pique, and their honour to their ambition." Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Watson (London, 1817), pp. 104-105.

with Lord North, that the business of reformation shall go no further."⁴⁶ However Wyvill saw one gleam of hope for the future; several of the great nobles had remained true to their commitment to reform and had refused to join the coalition. Amongst these were Rutland, Richmond, and of course Shelburne. Wyvill was particularly pleased that the Duke of Rutland followed Pitt into opposition; for when the Yorkshire Association had first attempted to place its petitions for reform before parliament, the Duke of Rutland had been one of the foremost to help.⁴⁷

Since Pitt and Rutland were both known to be committed to reform, when the King asked Pitt to form an administration in December 1783, hopes for electoral reform rose once again. The Duke of Richmond, at one time known as "the Radical Duke" because of his wholehearted support for reform of parliamentary representation, wrote to Rutland describing how their party's plans for reform were progressing:

I have great hopes, from the temper of the people here, that our favourite object of a Parliamentary reform is gaining ground apace. The popularity of Mr. Pitt and his administration is excessive. He has the fullest support of the people from all quarters, and when they have given him real power, they will expect that he should use it in carrying those measures in their favour to which he is pledged; and I am happy to say that he is very well disposed to keep his word, and by continuing to do right, will preserve his popularity.⁴⁸

At this period Wyvill believed that Pitt, Richmond and Rutland could

⁴⁶York Courant, September 23, 1783. This letter was reproduced in the Chronicle, September 26, 1783. Quoted from Ian Christie, Wilkes, Wyvill, and Reform (London, 1962), p. 194.

⁴⁷See J. Steven Watson, The Reign of George III, p. 230.

⁴⁸Letter from the Duke of Richmond to the Duke of Rutland, April 25, 1784. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 90.

lead the House to reform. Pitt had impressed Wyvill that he would "put forth his whole power and credit as a Man and as a Minister, honestly and boldly to carry a plan of Reform, by which our liberties will be placed on a footing of permanent security."⁴⁹

Daniel Pulteney, one of Rutland's group in the House, was uncertain how to vote on the question of reform, and wrote to Rutland in Ireland for his directions:

Sutton says he hears your Grace is pledged to support the Reform here. It is therefore necessary for us to know how to vote, for God knows we are not pledged, and should hardly think of dividing in any manner opposite to the views of your Grace. . . .⁵⁰

Rutland informed Pulteney that he was pledged, and directed him to support Pitt on the bill for reform.⁵¹

One of the reasons why in the past Rutland has been considered a reactionary was his decision in late 1782 to support Shelburne's ministry. Those Victorians who saw Fox as one of the fathers of their parliamentary system condemned Shelburne's ministry as reactionary, because they saw clearly that Shelburne distrusted the

⁴⁹Letter from Wyvill to the Rev. James Wilkinson, December 9, 1784, in Christopher Wyvill's Political Papers (York, 1794-1804), IV, 119. Wyvill did not generally trust politicians, but Pitt impressed him as a man seriously and sincerely devoted to reform. He told Wilkinson, "I trust you think I have not been hasty in giving my esteem to Ministers, or too apt to vouch for the integrity of their intentions. But, on this occasion, I feel I should act a mean and an ungenerous part if I did not most explicitly declare, that if I had entertained any doubt before, respecting Mr. Pitt's zeal for the public cause, which I certainly did not, these conversations must have convinced me of the purity of his political character, and his sincere and particular attachment to the cause of Parliamentary Reformation" (IV, 118).

⁵⁰Letter from Daniel Pulteney to the Duke of Rutland, May 25, 1784. HMC, Rutland MSS, III, 97.

⁵¹Sir Lewis Namier, Crossroads of Power (London, 1962), p. 16.

party system and wished to destroy it. Yet on questions of reform, Shelburne was no reactionary; he was an outspoken advocate for reform of representation. One of the reasons for the Duke of Rutland's decision to support the Shelburne ministry was Shelburne's sincere commitment to end the war and bring in reform. Richard Watson commented on the Duke's motives: "The Duke of Rutland wrote to me at Yarmouth -- that he had determined to support Lord Shelburne's administration, as he had received the most positive assurances, that the independency of America was to be acknowledged, and the wishes of the people relative to parliamentary reform granted."⁵² When the Duke decided to support Shelburne's administration, he did so on the express condition that reform of parliament be effected as soon as possible.

Another reason why critics have overlooked Rutland's strong commitment to reform was his support for William Pitt. Pitt's reputation as a reactionary in the late 1790's, has given him such a "Tory" reputation that all associated with him have automatically been labelled "Tory" and reactionary. Kebbel, in his biography of Crabbe, describes the formation of the ministry under Pitt in December 1783, as if some apocalyptic event, the advent of the Tory party, had taken place:

The Dukes of Rutland had been Whigs, but never very keen partisans. And now the young head of the house, who had only just completed his twenty-ninth year, touched, as were hundreds of other young men at the same time, by the appeal of their sovereign against the dictation of an

⁵²Richard Watson, Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Watson,

exclusive oligarchy, threw himself heart and soul into the Tory cause⁵³

Kebbel had been reading too much propaganda from Devonshire house; the real situation was quite different.

Pitt was certainly not conservative about reform in the early 1780's. He proposed the addition of one hundred County members and the disenfranchisement of boroughs which had been proved corrupt. Major John Cartwright, one of the most influential of all Radical leaders, welcomed the young Pitt as a promising leader of parliamentary reform.⁵⁴ In 1782 a number of Reformers met at the house of the Duke of Richmond and decided to raise the question of reform in the House of Commons. They asked Pitt to be their leader. On the 7th of May, Pitt moved that a committee be appointed to look into the representation of the House. He said:

It was simply his purpose to move for the institution of an inquiry, composed of such men as the House should, in their wisdom, select as the most proper and the best qualified for investigating this subject, and making a report to the House of the best means of carrying into execution a moderate and substantial reform of the representation of the people.⁵⁵

This motion, although it ended in defeat, established the Pittites as advocates of the reform movement in parliament. Of course Pitt and his followers were not the only reformers; the Foxites also strongly favoured reform. The important point for this discussion

⁵³T.E. Kebbel, Life of George Crabbe, p. 45.

⁵⁴G.S. Veitch, The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform, rev. ed. (London, 1965), pp. 83-85.

⁵⁵W. Cobbett, The Parliamentary History of England, XXII, 1417-1418.

is to recognize that in the early 1780's both groups were sincere reformers.

One of the strangest occurrences in English history is the rise and fall of enthusiasm for parliamentary reform. In the years 1780-1783 few members could be found who were not in favour of some measure of reform, and the demands of the nation seemed on the verge of fulfillment. Yet after Burke's economic reforms of 1782 had been implemented, this wave of enthusiasm for reform began to diminish, and by 1785 the attitude of the House was definitely hostile to reform. Unfortunately the climate of opinion for reform changed just at the time when Pitt came to power. Many people in the nineteenth century, unaware of Pitt's early commitment to reform, drew the false conclusion that the failure to implement parliamentary reform rested with Pitt. People like Crabbe's son were misled into believing that Pitt, Rutland and all their associates were opposed to reform.

One point does perhaps need some qualification lest it lead to confusion. Soon after taking up residence in Ireland Rutland began to entertain serious doubts about the advisability of implementing what he and Pitt had at first thought an essential for Ireland -- reform of the Irish parliament. Rutland wrote to Pitt:

The question of reform, should it be carried in England, would tend greatly to increase our difficulties, and I do not see how it will be evaded. In England it is a delicate question, but in this country it is difficult and dangerous in the last degree Your proposition of a certain proportionable addition of county members would be the least exceptionable, and might not perhaps materially interfere with the system of Parliament in this country, which, though it must be confessed it does not

bear the smallest resemblance to representation, I do not see how quiet and good government could exist under any more popular mode.⁵⁶

Rutland's fears were not groundless. The mutinous condition of Ireland made control from England difficult even with a corrupt government. With a reformed government in Ireland, English rule would have been impossible. However even after Rutland had cautioned Pitt about reform in Ireland, Pitt refused to give up his dream that reform could be effected in both countries. He wrote to Rutland to remind him of their past commitments to reform and to suggest that they both must continue to work for reform:

I am aware you may have seen local difficulties which may discourage you in this whole subject of reform, and make you doubt the possibility of applying our principles to Ireland; but let me beseech you to recollect, that both your character and mine for consistency are at stake, unless there are unanswerable proofs that the case of Ireland and England is different; and to recollect also, that however it is our duty to oppose the most determined spirit and firmness to ill-grounded clamour or factious pretensions, it is a duty equally indispensable to take care not to struggle but in a right cause.⁵⁷

Although Rutland began to question the feasibility of reform in Ireland, and to wonder if he could control the country if England voted for reform, he never wavered in his support for Pitt's reform bills. Pitt sustained his belief in reform for both countries until late 1785, when finally even he was forced to acknowledge that the Independents in the House were openly hostile to any reform of parliament. He gave up his reform ideas with great reluctance.

⁵⁶Letter from the Duke of Rutland to Pitt, June 16, 1784. Correspondence between Pitt and the Duke of Rutland, p. 17.

⁵⁷Letter from William Pitt to the Duke of Rutland, October 7, 1784. Correspondence between Pitt and the Duke of Rutland, p. 47.

IV

The notion of Crabbe's Whiggism originates with his son, who mentions: "I must also add, that, although he owed his introduction to Burke, his adherence, however mild, to the whig tenets of Burke's party may not have much gratified the circles of Belvoir."⁵⁸ What were these "whig tenets"? Critics have usually interpreted them in the light of the economic reforms passed by the Rockingham party, and have concluded that the "whig tenets" refer to reform. But if this is the correct interpretation, is it true to say that "the circle of Belvoir" objected to the economic reforms of Burke, Clerke and Crewe? Not at all. As a private member, Pitt, the leader of Rutland's party, voted for Burke's reform in 1782, helping to make it law.

If we push this argument one step further, the idea that Crabbe's "Whig" support of Burke's "liberal" Economic Reform bill was distasteful to the Duke of Rutland is shown to be obviously false. "Economic Reform" is the sole basis for Burke's reputation as a reformer. While the economic reforms were important in reducing government expenditure, one should realize that they did not in any way cover the reform of representation in the House of Commons. Burke, as is well known, rejected any "liberal" reform which would enlarge the representation in the House. However soon after Burke's bill for economic reform had been passed, Pitt proposed a motion for "a moderate and substantial reform" of parliament,⁵⁹ a

⁵⁸Life, Ch. v, pp. 126-127.

⁵⁹See above, p. 661.

motion which was far more liberal than Burke's, and which would have had far-reaching consequences. The Duke of Rutland's support of Shelburne was also support for radical reform, since Shelburne was known to be strongly in favour of reformed representation in the House. The important conclusion to be drawn from these points is that Crabbe's supposed "whig tenets," far from being unacceptable to the circles of Belvoir, were what they conceived to be minimal conditions. Pitt and Rutland saw "Economic Reform" as only the first stage of a reform which would enlarge the representation of the House of Commons. Thus support for Burke's "Economic Reform" could not have been distasteful to the Duke of Rutland. The Duke wanted economic reform and a great deal more.

Crabbe's son's remark about Crabbe's adherence to "whig tenets" may not of course have referred to the question of reform at all. He may have been thinking of Burke's desire to curtail the power of the king. Both Burke and Fox felt that Pitt had betrayed their cause when he accepted George III's offer of December 1783 to become First Lord of the Treasury. Yet Fox's belief that the king should not appoint ministers, and that ministries should be formed solely from the party with the greatest support in the House, were far in advance of his time. Very few members, even of his own following, accepted his theory as anything but visionary. Crabbe, of course, makes no mention of these purely political ideas. No evidence is available to show that he was ever remotely interested in such constitutional wrangles. His concern was with the poor and how to better their lot. In so far as the social question

becomes a political issue, then it becomes relevant to a study of Crabbe. But surely there is no gain in attempting to involve Crabbe in purely political questions, questions which he never mentions.

Crabbe's son makes a brief reference to how Crabbe "had more than once to drink a glass of salt water, because he would not join in Tory toasts."⁶⁰ What exactly he meant by this remark is not clear. Certainly the Duke of Rutland was no Jacobite. The word "Tory" often meant someone who was not keen on constitutional reform, but if the word "Tory" is being used in this sense, then in the early 1780's Burke would have to be reckoned the Tory, not Rutland or Pitt. One of the reasons why Burke distrusted Pitt after 1783, was that Pitt strongly favoured electoral reform. One has the suspicion that a "Tory toast" may have been no more than a toast to the King and a derogatory reference to the opposition -- to the Foxites.

Huchon took up the hint about Crabbe's politics found in the Life and expanded it to a full length theory to show Crabbe's antagonism to the politics of the Duke of Rutland. Although recent critics such as Robert Chamberlain seem to have taken their cue from Huchon, and to have accepted his theory that Crabbe was a Whig, Huchon adds nothing to the evidence about the supposed conflict of politics, except one letter from Crabbe to Burke in which he finds "a categorical profession of his [Crabbe's] political creed."⁶¹ This letter should

⁶⁰Life, Ch. vii, p. 176.

⁶¹Huchon, p. 135.

be quoted at length since it is often cited as proof that Crabbe was a Whig:

Sir, I have long delayed, though I much wished to write to you, not being willing to take up any part of your time with the impertinence of congratulation; but now I feel that I had rather be thought an intruder on your patience, than not to be a partaker of the general joy. Most heartily, indeed, do I rejoice, being well assured that if the credit and happiness of this kingdom can be restored, the wisdom and virtues of my most honoured friend, and his friends, will bring forward so desirable an event; and if not, it will be some satisfaction to find such men lost to the confidence of the people, who have so long demonstrated their incapacity to make a proper use of it.⁶²

This one paragraph of the letter is all that Crabbe has to say on his supposed Whig sympathies. Huchon maintains however that this letter is a "flattering eulogium of the Whigs and severe censure of the Tories."⁶³ What Crabbe does in this letter is to congratulate his patron on finally gaining a position of power (Edmund Burke had been made Paymaster), and to express the same dissatisfaction with the ministry conducting the war as was felt by the entire war-weary nation. The fall of Lord North meant that Rockingham would have a chance to end the war, which at this time only George III wished to continue. Furthermore one must be careful in determining whom Crabbe was censuring in his circumlocution, "such men . . . who have so long demonstrated their incapacity to make a proper use" of the confidence of the people. Certainly they would not have been people like Pitt and Rutland. Both Pitt and Rutland were opposed to the war; indeed Pitt was almost included in the Marquess of Rockingham's ministry at this time.

⁶²Letter from Crabbe to Burke, April 16, 1782. Correspondence of The Right Honourable Edmund Burke, ed. Earl Fitzwilliam, II, 475-476.

⁶³Huchon, p. 135.

Although Crabbe was a friend of both Burke and Fox the friendships were based on personal relationships, not devotion to a particular party. One should remember that Crabbe was also a friend of Thurlow, who was definitely a "king's man." Moreover Crabbe did not dedicate The Newspaper to any of the Whig leaders, but to Thurlow (a Tory). This action, however, does not make Crabbe a Tory; it does show that he was much less committed to any party than most people have been willing to admit.⁶⁴ The dedication also shows that Crabbe, as a literary man, had freedom of choice in politics. The situation in 1784 had changed from Addison's time when a writer with a patron in politics was expected to support the policies of his patron.

As further evidence that Crabbe did not consider himself a Whig, it may be recalled that when Crabbe went to London to seek employment in the world of letters, he approached politicians like North and Thurlow for help. This choice was partly the result of his father's slight acquaintance with North on election matters,⁶⁵ but also quite natural. A hopeful young poet would presumably approach the ministers in power, believing them to have the most

⁶⁴The version which Lord Holland gives of the help Crabbe received from political leaders illustrates this point: "The improvement in Mr. Crabbe's fortune was, in a great measure, owing to himself [Charles James Fox]. While Lord Thurlow was in office, he overcame his reluctance to asking favours of a political enemy, and urged that Chancellor to encourage genius by giving Mr. Crabbe some preferment. Lord Thurlow did something for him; and the Duke of Rutland, who had been applied to by Lord John Townshend, did more." Memoirs of the Whig Party During My Time, ed. Henry Edward Lord Holland (London, 1852), I, 255-256.

⁶⁵See also, Ch. 1.

patronage to dispense. Only after these men had refused their help did he approach the opposition -- Shelburne, and then Burke. Even after Crabbe had gained Burke's assistance, he did not become so rabid a follower of Burke that he rejected offers of help from other politicians. Thurlow gave him £100 and two small livings in the south of England. When Crabbe sought out eminent politicians, he did so, not on any political grounds, but in order to obtain help from those most likely to give it. There is no evidence to show that Crabbe was unable to keep up his personal friendships with Burke, Thurlow and Rutland, even though at different times they might oppose each other on questions of policy.⁶⁶

As has been noted earlier, critics have become confused in interpreting several of Crabbe's poems because they have uncritically accepted Crabbe's supposed Whiggism and the supposed difference in political opinion between Crabbe and the Duke of Rutland. These errors have created a false impression about the type of life Crabbe lived during his stay at Belvoir and in the years immediately after.

⁶⁶The case of Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, is apposite. Shelburne made him a bishop through the good offices of Rutland. Watson was concerned that he should not be embroiled in party politics and forced to follow a party line. He wrote of his experience: "I had written in support of the principles of the Revolution, because I thought those principles useful to the state, and I saw them vilified and neglected; I had taken part with the people in their petitions against the influence of the Crown, because I thought that influence would destroy the constitution, and I saw that it was increasing; I had opposed the supporters of the American war, because I thought that war not only to be inexpedient, but unjust. But all this was done from my own sense of things, and without the least view of pleasing any party: I did, however, happen to please a party, and they made me a bishop. I have hitherto followed, and shall continue to follow, my own judgment in all public transactions; all parties now understand this, and it is probable that I may continue to be Bishop of Landaff as long as I live. . . ." Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Watson, pp. 94-95.

They have caused critics to read into various of Crabbe's poems an attitude towards politics and social reform that is not in fact substantiated by internal evidence. Believing Crabbe was under some restraint to mute his social and political opinions at Belvoir, critics have been tempted to see his changed circumstances as one reason for the conservative attitude in Book II of The Village.⁶⁷ Because Huchon believed Crabbe to be an ardent Whig, his interpretation of The Newspaper has been affected. He had difficulty in understanding why the poem contained so little Whig doctrine, and came to the conclusion:

Crabbe seems to have followed the various incidents of this contest [the general election of 1784] with considerable indifference, either because, in spite of his sympathy for Burke and Liberal ideas, the coalition of Fox and Lord North was distasteful to him, or because his obligations to the Duke of Rutland, a colleague of Pitt in the ministry, had made him assume a prudent attitude and an air of disillusion.⁶⁸

But The Newspaper contains no mention of the election. None of the main figures -- George III, Pitt, Fox, Burke -- is mentioned. Indeed, if the following footnote had not been added to the first edition -- "The greatest part of this Poem was written immediately after the dissolution of the late parliament"⁶⁹ -- critics might never have mentioned a connection between the poem and the contest of the Pittites and the Foxites.

This election, which was bitterly contested, resulted in

⁶⁷ See Robert L. Chamberlain, George Crabbe, pp. 26-55; and Ian Gregor, "The Last Augustan," in Dublin Review, CLXXIX (1955), 41.

⁶⁸ Huchon, p. 176.

⁶⁹ The Newspaper, note to the first edition, at line 1. See Poems by George Crabbe, I, 533.

a great deal of political pamphleteering. As Crabbe's poem deprecates "party-rage" at this "busy, bustling time," a connection is not impossible. But since Crabbe's poem was published after the election, it can hardly be seen as an attempt to help either Rutland or Burke. The editorial note in the 1834 edition faintly argues that the poem refers to the election: "Notwithstanding the philosophical tone of his preface, it seems highly probable that Mr. Crabbe had been moved to take up the subject by the indignation he felt on seeing Mr. Burke daily abused, at 'this busy, bustling time,' by one set of party writers, while the Duke of Rutland was equally the victim of another."⁷⁰ Yet Crabbe's footnote to the first edition, which made explicit the connection between the election and the poem, was deleted in later editions -- an omission which does not in any way injure the subject of the poem. For the poem is not actually about the 1784 election or any election. The poem is not even concerned principally with the ills arising from party spirit. The subject of the poem is the nature of newspapers, and the opening reference to political pamphleteering is dropped after a few lines.

What has happened is that critics, taking over the belief that Crabbe was a Whig, have assumed he wrote The Newspaper wishing to put forward Whig views. When the critics could not find any Whig statements, they then turned to the other half of the myth -- that Crabbe's Whig ideas were unacceptable at Belvoir -- to explain why

⁷⁰The Poetical Works (London, 1834), II, 113.

none is present. What they should have done is to scrap the entire myth of Crabbe being a Whig in the Tory house of the Duke of Rutland.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the assumption -- Crabbe's liberal ideas were distasteful to the Duke of Rutland -- is incorrect. The Duke held liberal ideas himself, and was enthusiastic to see labourers helped and reform of parliament implemented. Certainly Crabbe may have found himself in delicate situations at Belvoir Castle; for after 1783 the Duke of Rutland and Burke no longer belonged to the same company. And Crabbe's son is probably correct in the belief that his father found difficulty in walking the tight-rope between his patrons in order to give offence to neither. But these political differences between Rutland and Burke were not over liberalism. Both the Pittites and the Foxites were committed to reform. Crabbe's "liberal" ideas could not have been unwelcome to the Duke, since he also was keenly interested in promoting better conditions for the people. Thus the argument that the politics of the Duke of Rutland forced Crabbe to assume a false conservative attitude has no basis in fact. It has arisen because of a misinterpretation of the political situation in 1780.

Perhaps the objection may be raised that the whole business of Whig and Tory matters little since the Duke of Rutland died in 1787, and Crabbe's best poems were written long after this date. More is at stake, however, than one or two poems. This thesis has been concerned to establish Crabbe's social ideas. Most people have seen Crabbe as a liberal, and rightly so. But confusion has occurred at the most elementary level over the connection between Crabbe's

social ideals and political events. If critics are naively to link Crabbe's social ideas with Burke's "Whig" doctrines, then no little amount of mischief will result. Crabbe's concern with social questions arose from his own personal experience; his poetry was not tied to any particular party or any particular set of reform bills. As a social poet, Crabbe should be seen in the context of the widespread movements amongst the people to better social conditions. Like Christopher Wyvill, Crabbe placed his hopes on the individual, and the influence individuals could exert to better the human condition, not on the manoeuvres of the politician.

"The Squire" is on three of the eight pages of two unbound leaves folded to octavo size in the John Murray archive. I have prepared a version of the first sixteen lines of "The Squire" under the title "Contentment" (Poems by George Crabbe, III, 493). The date of the poem is uncertain. However as the title "The Squire" has been written in ink over two illegible lines in lead pencil, and as Crabbe used pencil only near the end of his life it seems reasonable to assume the poem is late.

THE SQUIRE

I thank our Father's Lord! No Part has he
Within our Power, he is truly Free
In his own House he resides with all
That yet remains standing as his Hall
He loves his Place, but has not loved to prove
That, from his House, he has not moved

That when he was young and then neglected
He was not in the way to be neglected
The whole line was then changed to "That he has not moved"
The whole line was then changed to "That he has not moved"

APPENDIX 2

AN UNPUBLISHED MS POEM: "THE SQUIRE"

"The Squire" is on three of the eight pages of two unbound leaves folded to octavo size in the John Murray archive. Ward printed a version of the first sixteen lines of "The Squire" under his own title "Contentment" (Poems by George Crabbe, III, 493). The date of the poem is uncertain. However as the title "The Squire" has been written in ink over two illegible lines in lead pencil, and as Crabbe used pencil only near the end of his life it seems reasonable to assume the poem is late.

THE SQUIRE

I leave our Manor's Lord! No Part has he
 Within our Borough, he is truly free
 In his own Mansion he resides with all
 That Man requires attending at his Call
 He loves his Ease but, Yet has oftimes proved
 That, Minds assenting, Bodies may be moved

5

- 6 That emended to When and then rejected
assenting emended to are willing and then rejected
the entire line was then emended to That he by powerful motives
may be moved and then rejected

He loves his own good Lady & her Word
 Is Law to all Except her own Good Lord
 He holds Life's Comforts as a general Good
 But takes not Cordials for his common food 10
 Nor thinks because the Vintage Grows for Man
 That He may take What Quantity he can
 In short our worthy Squire is One who tries
 To be as merry as beseems the wise
 And though for Wisdom he is not renowned 15
 Or answers Questions puzzling or profound
 Yet has he plain good Sense & walks his Way
 Through Life securely, rather grave than gay
 And Now tis said when verging on three score,
 He loves his Money better than before 20
 Nor likes a Tenant who upon the Day
 When he s^d be forth coming, keeps away
 He was both Whig & Tory & his Mind
 An Even Ballance neither Way inclined
 But should a Weight be placed in either Scale 25
 Though but a Feather, it must then prevail
 In his own House, by Tory-Spirit swayed
 Man must obey he says & be obeyed
 He served his Sovereign Lord with Life & Limb
 And his Dependents so should honour him 30
 Placed in his Magesterial Chair his Look
 Declared the Tory Justice eer he spoke
 And he would rail at all who dared encroach
 On Rights Established, Rogues who snare & poach
 He called them Rascal-Traytors, Scoundrels, Knaves 35
 And had no pity on th assuming Slaves
 Yet was he kind when properly addressed
 And all the Tory-Dignity confessed
 A Tory-Sheriff at the Judges Side
 was shewn in his Subservience & his Pride 40

7-8 Word/ Is Law] Words / are Laws

9 holds] takes
 The sign ~~≠~~ precedes He

10 But . . . food] But does not take her Cordials for his food

12 What Quantity] th utmost that (undeleted)

17 - 18 walks his Way / . . . gay] rarely Errs / In his Ideas
of Mens Characters;

19 Tis said that now he verges (undeleted); a second version (also
 undeleted) is: Tis said indeed that verging on 60.

22 original line heavily scored out so as to be illegible

40 was shewn] He seemed

In fact when He would be or loved or feared
 With high or low the Tory Squire appeared
 But with his Equals & his Friends around
 The Tory Pride in Rebel Port was drowned
 Then he discoursed of Land Tax & Excise
 Till the strong Spirit of the Whig would rise
 Taxes like mice was [sic] numberless of late
 And nibbling round would eat up his Estate
 On Horse, Dog, Carriage, All that we could name
 Taxes like Murrain or like Mildew came
 Was there no Patriot from the Country sent
 Who would such Evils strongly represent?
 None who to ministerial Slaves would shew
 What saving Care they to their Country Owe
 None who the Ills that We so long endure
 Will call on our presiding Lords to cure
 Thus as his State or money touched his Mind
 He to the Tories or the Whigs inclined
 Would now of Freedom & his Blissings [sic] sing
 And now devoutly pray God save the King ? [sic]
 Peace to his Soul, his Comforts to acquire
 I bid Farewell to Whig & Tory Squire

45

50

55

60

48 eat up] ruin (undeleted)

54 saving Care] care

55 We so long endure] War has caused

61 the first letter of acquire is almost illegible

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